Nightingale

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Rating:
NC-17/ MA 15+

Mod warnings:
This fic contains depictions of sexual dynamics that many readers may find extremely disturbing, and, well, traumatic. That's half the point. But don't say we didn't warn you.

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by michi_thekiller

Summary

God loved the birds and invented trees. Man loved the birds and invented cages.
-Jacques Deval

Notes

This was inspired by a drabble/plot bunny over at the Big Bang forums written by Spaggel and requested by Aja. Sorry, Aja, I'm sure this isn't the story that you had in mind, but this is the story that ended up being written!

Also, this is of utmost importance: Thank you, thank you, thank you, from the deepest cockles of my heart to [image]**yuumoya**, who was miraculously able to hold my hand and stroke my hair through this even at the worst of times, when I was snarling and foaming at the mouth. She made me believe in the impossible. Without her, this story would be little more than a pathetic dribbling of story-seed. It is our strange illegitimate lovechild. I love you, baby.

-"In the country of pain, we are each alone."-

When his eyes are closed, there is always someone who cries.

It is the first thing that Harry hears when he wakes up in the morning, that fading whimpering sound. Sometimes it's a sob, heart-broken and wrenching, and sometimes it's a wail, but sometimes it is a quiet, lonely thing.

Today it's the just the sniffles, like the mystery crier has a bad cold more than anything. It washes into the sound of rain drumming on the window like a hundred thousand fingertips. On the clock/radio, they are playing the UK Top 40, and it's one of those bands with the bloke singer that sounds like a girl, and he thinks, this is a song that never ends.

"Really," Harry says to himself quite sternly, "life wouldn't be all that much better if I were dead." He counts it was his first Cheerful Thought of the Day. Then it occurs to him that he is talking to himself like a crazy person, and that is Not Such a Cheerful Thought.

He tries to shake himself of it. He feels particularly empty this morning. It doesn't help that he sent himself to bed without dinner. And there's also the fact that he's just had one of those dreams that seems so real that it convinces you that that is your particular universe, that that is where you belong, even when you try to tell yourself that it's only a dream. He can still smell the dream-smells, still feel the ghosts of touches upon his skin – there hadn't even been any weird parts to it, no pantyhose, not even a single slippery salmon.

It had been a good dream, this time, the kind that fills you with a warm sort of pleasure and is so perfect that it makes your heart ache. It had spread through his body like a hot cup of cinnamon tea. He feels bereft upon waking, and it is better not to try to remember it; good dreams like that one are the absolute worst kind.

He knows that most people would think that his dreams are dark, crawling with long spider leg shadows and snakes' tongues and bodies and blood. It's almost expected of them to think that; Harry at least takes comfort in the predictability. (Well, Wednesdays is spiders night, Thursday nights at 3 am he wakes up screaming from a war flashback, and every other Sunday is the strange one about the giant piece of toast, but that's after he's had too much leftover casserole.) It has been a long time since he has shared them with anybody. They usually

don't like to hear it, although they never come out and say it, they get a certain kind of worried look on their faces. Hermione-looks. Hermione had suggested that he see somebody, maybe. PTSD, she had called it. Post-traumatic stress disorder.

Do you have flashbacks, she had asked. Nightmares?

She had run down the other symptoms in a litany of concern. Emotional numbing, detachment, loss of interest in activities. Avoidance, difficulty sleeping and concentrating, irritability, hypervigilance.

(Say what you will about Hermione, but at least she never lost her passion for memorising textbooks.)

Of course not, Harry had said. Where would you get those ideas?

That's just a whole list of Not At All Cheerful Thoughts, and those are the kinds of things that keep you down.

In the shower, he turns on the water hot, hot, loving the almost painful soothe of it, watching his skin turn red. He washes his hair quickly and curses when he gets shampoo in his eyes. He trails his hand down the flat, muscled planes of his own chest, touching his morning erection idly. He tries to think of nothing when he comes. The splatter of white on the tiled shower wall looks kind of like an animal. A goat or a dog, something with ears and four legs. He's not sure whether that thought is Cheerful or Not, or maybe it's just Crazy Again.

Kreacher has made breakfast: two perfect eggs, sunny-side up like golden eyes, and toast and marmalade. Kippers, even. Harry eats as if he is starved, stabbing through the eggs with his fork so that their insides bleed yellow all over his plate. He can't seem to gain weight. He has spent his whole life being hungry, in various ways.

At least he and Kreacher get along fairly well now, "fairly well" in the sense that he's not afraid that the house elf will murder him in his sleep and then wear his skin like a superhero cape. He also cooks good food for him and Harry can eat it and trust that, 99% of the time, there are no extra "special" ingredients. The extra one percent is just mostly Harry being paranoid and indulging himself in Extremely Gross thoughts.

Mostly, he thinks.

Sometimes he glances over The Daily Prophet while he eats. He's no longer on the front page so much, anyway. He doesn't really miss it, of course, and walking in the street he still gets the random requests for autographs, from time to time. Once he signed a girl's tit (just one, mind you, not two), but he had to stop after that – he had no idea that it was such a downward slope, no idea that before you knew it, people would be pulling out body parts left and right.

Today he is stopped in the street by a man in a trenchcoat with a hat pulled low over his eyes. For a second Harry thinks he is a flasher, and is surprised at himself, but just barely, to find that that is actually a Cheerful Thought. Not that Harry's a pervert or anything, of course, but it would be nice to be surprised not by someone who wanted to kill him, but by someone who wanted to do something as wholly innocent as show off his bits. It would help to break up the dreary monotony of the day, after all.

The man is not a flasher, sadly, and instead wants Harry to sign a photo collection of himself that would rival Colin Creevey's. "Who should I make it out to?" Harry asks.

"Don't make it out to nobody," the man huffs gruffly. Harry's learned to stop asking questions about what people plan to do with his photos.

Autographs for nobody. Thinking on Colin's little dead body, Harry scrawls his name over his own face over and over again, and sometimes it looks like he's giving himself a moustache and sometimes it looks more like a beard, until his hand is all stiff and can't write anymore.

He reminds himself to wear disguises when he goes out, after that. Maybe a set of those Groucho Marx glasses, as long as it wasn't the enchanted kind that bonded to your face. Fred and George had sold something like that, back when it had still been Fred-and-George. George's joke shop tends towards a more morbid sort of humour these days, personalised chocolate coffins and Torture-Your-Own-Dark-Lord action figures (now with kung-fu grip). The kids love them. It's a sign of the times – these, our post-Dark-Lord times, the Daily Prophet would say.

Soon Harry arrives at the seemingly abandoned department store, past the sign that perpetually reads "Closed for Refurbishment," past the dummy that, today, is sporting a white leisure suit with sequins, platforms with goldfish inside, and a big Afro wig. He's pretty sure that the goldfish are dead.

Harry keeps his head down when he passes through the entrance, half not to be recognised and half because he doesn't really care to look at people with magical injuries anymore, no matter how ridiculous. It's hard to avoid bumping into people from time to time like this, however, and he ends up walking straight into a man who has a medium-sized shark protruding out of his chest.

"Hey, watch where you're—aren't you Harry Potter?"

"Y-you've got the wrong bloke," Harry stutters out quickly, escaping before the man can ask him to sign his shark.

The receptionist to the ward blushes when she sees him, ducking her head. Her name is Anne and she is a pretty but mousy little thing with soft brown hair. He gives her a smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," she says.

"Morning," he greets.

"Here to see...?"

"Yeah."

"Go on right in, then."

The doors swing open for him and he always has to close his eyes a little, hold his breath a little, just before he walks through them.

First thing when he enters the ward, he stops a passing nurse. She wears white robes with slightly suspicious stains, her curly hair piled up on her head, a few tendrils escaping the pins. He's seen her around for a while now, and she's usually here when he comes, although he can never remember her name. "Mr. Potter!" she says. "How lovely to see you."

"How is he doing?" Harry asks instead, not rude since these are always the first words out of his mouth when he comes here. He knows that nothing is different, there is never a change, but to stop asking is the same as stopping all hope.

"Nothing since the last time you came, why don't you go on in and give a little greet, eh? He's missed you." The nurse pats him on the back and then turns to open the door. Her dark hair is pulled back into a tight bun, a spiral of darkness sitting on her skull.

Harry sighs and moves past her, "Yeah, I'll do that." Walking in, he sees the lone figure, sitting at a chair by the window and looking out. The grey eyes are as steady as iron, dull and unwavering in their scrutiny of a small tree just outside.

"Hey." Harry feels like the air has been forced out of him. Seeing Draco like this, there is a fist in his stomach, and the feeling reminds him of things that he'd rather forget. Some of them because they are too bad to remember, and some of them because they are too good.

"....H-h-arry?" The blonde opens up to him, stuttering over his name but eyes lighting up.

He forces himself to smile. "Draco," he says, and walks over, each step like moving through water. But it is Draco who turns to him, like a flower towards the sun.

"How are we doing today?" he asks, his voice deceptively cheerful, gentle. If Draco is a live flower, planted in the ground, Harry is one of fabric and plastic, collecting dust. He shouldn't be anyone's sun. (Or son, for that matter, since he apparently gets people killed, but that's a pun he doesn't much want to think about.) There are glass vases full of those colourful, horrible fake flowers here, all over the place.

"G-good," Draco manages to stutter out, and he slides his arms around Harry's waist, pressing his face into his stomach.

Harry inhales deeply, his fingers stroking pale, pale blonde hair. It looks faded and dull, like aging silk thread, not bleached brilliant near-white-gold by the sunlight. It's getting too long; they don't know how to take care of him here, not the way that he deserves.

"H-haarry days are b-best," Draco manages, and Harry does have to smile at that, even though it hurts.

The rain drums against the window. Draco's body is warm against him. The light in the room is grey and Draco's roommate keeps on knocking on the door...from the inside of the room. Even though the door is propped open.

Harry doesn't know how much longer he can take of this. That is a Not So Cheerful Thought. He tries to counteract that with a cheerful one and he comes up empty. The best thing he can think of is how easy it would be to slip poison into the sweets that he brings Draco when he visits.

"Draco," he says, "a cheerful thought, please."

"Cats," Draco answers definitively, with all the confidence he once had. Harry looks at him questioningly.

"They're s-soft," Draco manages slowly. Harry smiles in spite of himself.

"S-sneaky. And. Green eyes."

"That's a good one," Harry praises, and as Draco closes his eyes and presses into his touch, he knows that it is just a less arrogant way of saying of course it is, I came up with it, you dummy.

Harry supposes that he will have to forfeit this round. This is one game that Draco's just better at, these days.

On nice days he might take him out to the garden, walk around the path. Harry could bring bread for him to toss at the various birds. Draco likes to see them fight over it, and aims for their backs so that he can watch the poor unfortunate birds attacked by their fellow feathered brethren. It's better than throwing rocks at the birds and so Harry indulges him; it's worth it to see him laugh, even if this laugh is different from the scornful sound he was once so used to hearing. Draco holds onto his hand, tightly, their fingers laced and intertwined. Even his bones feel thin. Harry holds on to his hand as if afraid that the blonde might slip away if he lets go, like falling off a cliff, or being swept away by high water. That's something that comes easily to Harry now – gentle, reassuring touch, squeezing that hand back, tracing his fingers over the smooth skin of a cheek, brushing through the long strands of hair at the nape of Draco's neck.

Today it's not a going-out day. It's rainy and so they stay in. Harry touches him all the same, each finger careful and gentle, feeling the skin, soft and real. "Rain, rain, go away," Draco sings, "come again another day," over and over again until Harry makes him stop. The roommate keeps on knocking, knocking away.

It doesn't matter what Harry says to him, Draco almost always smiles when he's around. It makes him shiver, and it can almost mask that medicine smell that seems to waft off his hospital robes, that herbal scent of the potions that they feed him and that don't do anything.

Soon enough he has to leave; he can never stand to be there long, not with all the disjointed forms in the hallway, the sobbing and laughing he sometimes hears. It's not Draco, at least, not this time; it hasn't

been, not since the very beginning. Leaving is the hardest part of visiting, next to coming in. Draco puts up a fuss, of course, spoiled brat even now, and it's reassuring to know that some things never change. When he leaves he hurries out, and he tries not to bump into anybody with anything protruding from their bodies.

When Harry goes home at night, he wants to curl up in the shower. He doesn't. He brews a kettle of tea but he doesn't drink it. Then he puts himself into bed early.

-*-

-"I like a look of agony, because I know it's true." -

It began sixth year. Of course, one could argue that it began from the very beginning, a dark robe shop, talk of half-giants and Quidditch, and then the train - layers upon layers of meaning and implications. Maybe it began even before that – the sins of the fathers, and similar bullshit.

Most stories begin 'once upon a time,' of course, but Harry never thought of his story like one of those stories. Ick.

Sixteen is an age of trials and tribulations, even without the whole saving the world gig. It is strange emotions run high, changing bodies settling, a slow rupture from the awkward chrysalis of puberty to whatever strange insect stage of adulthood. Harry grew taller over the summer, but he wished he were a bit taller still. It seemed that he was forever doomed to be a bit on the short side, probably due to all the malnutrition as a child, not to mention being forced to curl up in small spaces. (It was the same thing with goldfish, wasn't it? The way that they only grow as big as their tank allows.) He grew stronger, however, and that was something to be proud of, he supposed. It was probably an admirable achievement, considering all the time he spent lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling, contemplating Sirius. Most of his workout routine probably consisted of pacing around his room, punching things, and lifting his textbooks from place to place without reading them. (It wasn't so much cleaning his room as just moving shit around.) If he had been a more business-minded person, he probably could have made a tidy little profit on marketing this programme to gullible young first years. The Clinically Depressed Workout Regimen can work wonders.

There was a certain finality to it all the moment that he stepped onto Platform 9 and ¾, respective Weasleys and Hermione in tow. He had spent his summer sticky with heat and with thoughts of death; already he was in a foul mood. It didn't help that as soon he was back on the Hogwarts Express, he spotted Draco Malfoy.

The last time he had seen Malfoy, he had been a slug. It was this image that Harry preferred to keep in mind, Malfoy fat and oozing, slicking the carpet of the Hogwarts Express with buckets of slime. Of course when he had run into him and his mother in Diagon Alley the fact of the matter was different – he was taller, for one thing, which was completely unfair, although he was as pointy-featured as ever. He

filled out his robes a little better when he returned to school, or perhaps it was that they fit him better, which Harry could attribute to whatever posh robe designer they had gone to instead of Madame Malkin. He was not slug-like at all, and as a way of further annoying Harry, he was almost good-looking, in fact. Harry wasn't about to be fooled by this, of course, even though some girls were.

Malfoy was Malfoy and would always be loathsome. He was even more loathsome now because it was deceptive – their whole family was like that, deceptive, things that didn't look dangerous but were – like quicksand, or the very thin sheet of ice on top of the lake that could send stupid first years to a watery grave, if not for the giant squid.
When he looked at him, he tried to picture that same slug in his robes, the dark fabric clinging tightly to the wet, slippery body, made even darker in patches where the slime soaked through. It was an utterly satisfying image to have while biting into a wriggling Chocolate Frog.

"Are you all right, mate?" Ron asked, looking a little disturbed.

"'m fine," Harry replied, a mouth full of Frog with one leg sticking out and still kicking.

Staring at him in his stupid fitted robes, buttoned up to his throat, looking so stupid and pristine, Harry was positive that Malfoy was a Death Eater. He had seen the protective way he cradled his arm, after all, the way he had jerked away and yelled at Madame Malkin, insisting that she had been poking him with pins. Then again, it was possible that he was just being a twat.

Harry wondered if his new physique had come from the "My Daddy's in Jail" workout routine, but then decided that Malfoy was probably too heartless to care.

It was that very day, on the train that Harry ended up with a broken nose. It was a dirty, sneaky, underhanded ploy, just like Malfoy, to take advantage of him in his Petrified State.

He couldn't move, couldn't do anything, when the foot came crashing down, although the pain was instantaneous and the crunch of bone and cartilage was particularly crisp.
Harry, who had been waiting all summer to finally punch somebody, felt veritably cheated.

This called for revenge, of course.

First chance he got, as soon as he ran into Malfoy again, he would take him by surprise. He would grab him by those stupid high-collared robes and shake him, he would punch him and punish him for being – well, for lack of a better word – evil. He'd punish him for running off and joining the Death Eaters, and plotting to kill him, and for wearing high-collared robes when it was still too warm out, and for just, generally, being an annoying little shit.

The first day of classes, Harry got his chance. He could spot that blonde head from any distance, and today it seemed especially annoying, especially bright - glowing, almost, as a shaft of sunlight reflected off of it. Malfoy's head was bowed as he spoke to Pansy Parkinson, his two goons noticeably missing. Her brightly-painted lips brushed his ear when she leaned in, and when Malfoy smiled Harry was filled with righteous anger all over again. Junior killers-in-training weren't supposed to smile and date girls just like everybody else; they weren't allowed.

Harry had spent the summer mourning his godfather, trapped with family who didn't want him and never had. Harry, who always did what was good and right and who was meant to save the world, couldn't even keep a girlfriend on account of her mourning her dead boyfriend. Malfoy had most likely spent his summer in his big, comfortable mansion, coddled by his mother, throwing crazy Death Eater parties and orgies and having a blast sacrificing goats and who knew what else. Even though his father was in prison, here he was, smiling, holding hands with a girl who adored him, who probably told him she loved him, or whatever counted for the evil version of "love" anyway.

(Which was probably focused around making pureblood children and being rich and having lots of things, evil people were always so appallingly superficial. Malfoy would never have dated her before she lost all that weight, would break up with her if she got so much as a zit, he was sure.)

Before he knew it, Hermione was saying, "Harry, what are you doing?" and he had stalked over to Malfoy. Before the blonde could even sneer "Potter ," Pansy Parkinson was screaming bloody murder and before anyone could stop him, the first punch, just as he had promised himself, hit the side of Malfoy's stupid head with a satisfying sort of pound.

Unfair, some might say, even though he had always been into fighting fair. Split moments later his vision went black and there was a burst of

pain and then he was tasting blood, coppery and warm, flooding his mouth.

His ears pounding to near bursting with the roar of blood, his chest thudding with adrenaline, he struck out again. A soft pink lip split, like a flower petal tearing, and the hot red blood spilled all over that pale chin, dripping onto the front of dark robes, where it seeped in, unseen.

Malfoy spit, spluttered, a few stray droplets from a spray of blood and spit landed on Harry's skin. He staggered back, clapped his hands over his mouth, and then he charged.

The pain that reverberated up his arm felt good, the way his fist seemed to connect with all bones. Malfoy was good to punch, just for that; that feeling of solid connection, the way his body yielded to Harry's fist. Malfoy packed a solid punch himself, although one would never guess it, not from looking at his slight frame, his slender limbs. Weak, girlish little spaghetti arms, Harry thought happily, although this particular spaghetti delivered quite a slap, as he was forced to admit when a fist connected with his jaw and he nearly bit his tongue in half.

True to his word, the first fight of the year was worse than ever. They attracted quite a crowd, of course, and with Fred and George gone it was the Slytherins that were taking bets.

At first it would be hard to say who had the upper hand. Malfoy wasn't as strong but he was twice as *vicious*, resorting to everything except a knee in the groin. But Harry *was* stronger, and Harry wanted this more, wanted to punch him and punch him, smear him into a bloody pulp, turn him upside down and use him like a strange thin mop and later he would deny it when Hermione mentioned that he might possibly have anger issues.

"Harry!" Hermione screamed. "Stop! He's not worth it!"

Worth it? No, Malfoy wasn't worth very much at all. But this wasn't about Malfoy's hypothetical worth, or what supposed worth even meant, it was about giving him what he *deserved*.

"Yeah! Go Harry!" Ron cheered in the background, bolstering him before his voice was lost in the crowd.

Harry welcomed each pain and bite of blood. He had spent the beginning of his summer feeling numb, watching the flies crawl on the

ceiling of his tiny room at Privet Drive, thinking on someone who had gone and passed and who no one in the household had ever known. He might as well have been mourning jolly old St. Nicholas, or, in their eyes, the Boogeyman.

He wanted to punish Malfoy, not just for the train thing, or even the Death Eater thing. Even the whole making-my-life-even-more-miserable-for-the-past-six-years thing wasn't the whole reason behind it. There was something else here. Malfoy was Malfoy and then he was his own father and then he was his aunt and then he was his cousin – Sirius - and then he was just Malfoy again, blonde and thin and sharp full of angles.

It didn't last nearly as long as it should have, as Harry wanted it to. There was always the matter of interference. Just as he was on top of Malfoy, just as he'd gotten a hold on him, getting ready to smash his stupid blonde head into the flagstones, there were arms on him, large hands with strong, stubby iron fingers - he was being pulled off. Of course it would be Crabbe and Goyle, mountains of meat and muscle, Malfoy's bodyguards, coming to that nancy boy's rescue. It figured, after all, Malfoy could never fight his own fights.

When Crabbe and Goyle jumped into the fray, Hermione had her wand out and Ron and Seamus were right there with them. Even Neville had stepped forward, wand out like a sword in one of his moments of bravery and loyalty. Then there were other Slytherins – Harry didn't really know their names, but he was sure Pansy Parkinson incited them – and it was no longer just a spectator sport, it was more of a group activity.

For a moment it seemed like a Mexican standoff was about to happen – like in Westerns that Dudley occasionally watched on TV – everybody with their wands drawn and facing each other, the air tense; Harry felt a drop of liquid slide down his neck and wasn't sure if it was his own sweat or maybe Malfoy's blood. He felt sore and bruised all over, if not broken in parts.

And then Malfoy let out a small sound – a moan or a groan of pain? No, more like, a pitiful whimper – probably to get attention. It worked. Pansy was by his side in an instant, even Hermione was looking worried. Harry didn't want to think what he did, but of course he thought it; that girls were a soft touch, and Malfoy was too, too deceptive for his own good.
Everybody's attention was diverted then, although the glares remained.

"Maybe you should get him to the Infirmary," Hermione said.

"Look after your own before you even try to advise me on mine," Pansy hissed.

But that was ridiculous. Harry felt fine.

He touched his own forehead. His fingertips came away with a smear of red.

Okay, that would explain the headache. And the slight dizziness. Probably from that part where Malfoy had swung him into the wall.

"Harry, what was that about?" Hermione was shocked, appalled, as if seeing him for the first time all over again. Her brown eyes wide, her hair particularly wild, as if each strand were waving, quivering in their indignation, in order to reprimand him, too. "What *happened* just now? God, look at you."

Harry swallowed and could not answer. He tasted blood in his mouth, hot and coppery and salty.

"Harry, that was bloody brilliant!" Ron crowed. "You handed Malfoy's arse to him on a platter!" He clapped him heartily on his back. Harry winced, "Ow!"

Hermione said sharply, "Ron!"

"Sorry," Ron said, still grinning.

"Ron, you can't encourage this!" Hermione continued, hitting Ron. "Violence doesn't solve anything!"

"Ow!" Ron said.

Hermione turned her attentions to Harry. "We need to get you to the Infirmary."

"I'm fine," Harry insisted, blinking at her.

Hermione wasn't listening, already starting to guide him in the right direction. "Ron, take his other arm. And I don't know what possessed you to do that, Harry, but you were frightening. You could have killed him!"

Harry thought, personally, that this was all a gross exaggeration. After all, Malfoy could pick himself off the ground, (albeit with some help)

and he certainly had enough life left in him to spit in Harry's direction – a gob of saliva, darkened with blood.

His jaw ached. He stumbled a bit and Ron caught him.

"Incredible," Ron said, still looking at him with a bit of awe. They were all looking at him with a bit of awe, Ron and Seamus and Ginny and Neville and even quiet Dean. It was only Hermione who glared at him, her face stony, judging, parental.

"I'd say Harry won, wouldn't you?" Seamus whispered to Dean. "The odds were probably in his favour, but money's money, right?"

Hermione turned her disapproving gaze on both of them, "And we're not even going to talk about how wrong gambling is."

The two groups made their way to the hospital wing, careful not to even give the impression that either group knew the other, aside from the occasional murderous glare from Pansy Parkinson– who, it was noted, was not actually carrying or supporting Malfoy, but rather bossily directing how Crabbe and Goyle ought to do it.

"Careful! Don't jostle him!" she said. And, "Be careful with his side!" And "Are you trying to walk him into the corner?"

One could only hope, of course, Harry thought.

Madam Pomfrey looked all too delighted to see them. Harry really hadn't seen her much last year, and he had forgotten the way her eyes would always light up when presented with the sick, the wounded, and the dying.

Unspoken, the two groups automatically move to put their respective charges on opposite sides of the infirmary, as if by natural magnetic repulsion.

"Keep your psycho-killer on your side!" Pansy said, glaring at them distrustfully.

Ron automatically took offence. "Right, as if Malfoy is so innocent—"

"Oh, yes, Draco *really* started it this time!" she retorted. "Such a horrible, indecent offence that he was *minding his own business* and actually –gasp! – talking to me! That's certainly worthy of a beating. I didn't think it was possible, but you're even dumber than you look."

"But you *are* horribly and indecently offensive..." Ron began.

Madam Pomfrey came around before Round II: Ronald Weasley versus Pansy Parkinson could happen.

"Normally I would never hit a girl," Ron muttered to Harry later, "but for one like that, I think I might make an exception." Harry couldn't blame him. "Besides," Ron added, "she's a Slytherin, so it's not like she's a real girl, anyway. I'm pretty sure Millicent Bulstrode has a five o'clock shadow."

And of course Malfoy was in there, pretending it hurt far more than it actually did. There was blood on his face – but he certainly looked far worse off than he actually was. Pansy Parkinson made a fuss, even Crabbe and Goyle looked vaguely worried in their own, obtuse way, Blaise Zabini went between Harry and Malfoy, writing down the total damage to their bodies on a piece of parchment.

"A black eye is worth ten points," Blaise decided, "but a scratch can't be worth more than one or two."

"You bet *against* me?" he heard a bandaged Malfoy splutter to Pansy after they were released, cradling a hurt arm like a baby.

"I most certainly did not!" Pansy was quick to correct him. "Only Blaise did, and Marcus did, and I only lent Blaise a few Galleons since he was short at the time..."

"You're paying Zabini for unspoken services while I was defending my life? Harlot! Strumpet! Vile, wicked woman!"

"Draco, darling, don't," Pansy cooed gently. "You'll rupture something and give yourself a nosebleed again."

"Traitors!" Malfoy had cried, "Ingrates! Infidels!" He spluttered a bit and Pansy fretted over him, handkerchief fluttering about his face like some sort of attacking seagull, genuinely worried about the nonexistent nosebleed. Harry rather hoped he did rupture something – preferably a vein in his brain, or something just as good. She pet and soothed him until he calmed down, refusing to do so until he had forced a rather vocal declaration of loyalty out of her, and publically announced that he was the best-looking boy she had ever known, and the bandages just added to his rugged machismo. Harry thought that he was overreacting – it was clear that he basked in the attention- and privately added it to his list of Reasons Why Malfoy Deserved to be Punched in the Face. He was more than happy to provide this

particular service, and he considered it to be a community service, in fact – a favour to himself, and to everybody else.

That night when Harry closed his eyes, he saw red and felt satisfied. His tired muscles sank into the bed; his sleep was deep and complete and sound.

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-"I felt a funeral, in my brain, and mourners to and fro, kept treading, treading, till it seemed that sense was breaking through."-

Long, even strokes as a brush runs through fine blonde hair, as colourless as moonlight.

Draco seems to purr when Harry touches him, or maybe cooing is the word for that small, slight sound that he makes. He's so easy, so needy for touch and affection, Harry wonders if he was like this as a small child, and if his mother pet him the way his own mother never lived to do. He wonders if his father, as imposing and cold as he was, took him to the park, taught him to catch a Snitch, or if he held him and bounced him on his knee. He can't imagine Lucius Malfoy having ever been anything close to tender; he practically sacrificed his own son, after all, led him right to the slaughter, a pathetic thing in a den of Death Eaters.

(For he so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...")

Harry resolves to give Draco better care than anyone ever could.

Tuesday is Tuna Day and the whole ward smells like fish. Harry prefers Chicken day, not that the particular meat matters much, since the food usually all comes in one of two colours: either poop brown or goop grey.

Draco irritably bats the brush away as it catches a tangle and snags. For a moment Harry wonders if he'll try to bite it, like a kitten. *What are you doing, Potter, trying to pull out my hair, in the most painful way possible?* He might have said. *Not that I wouldn't look good bald. At least my head is perfectly round. Yours is probably squashed from the Dark Lord dropping you on your head as a child.*

Harry bops Draco on the nose lightly with the brush. "Be nice," he chides, and he smiles, just a little, at the pout.

"*You're* n-not being nice," Draco informs him. It's not much of an insult, but Harry supposes that it'll do for now.

"Don't you want your hair to be pretty?" Harry asks, and he rests his hand on Draco's neck, his thumb stroking the bones that hide beneath it. This Draco has a different set of words for speaking to, a different language.

Draco seems to arch back into his touch, just like a little cat, and just that motion is almost enough to make up for the poor quality of his comeback. Almost.

"'Course I do," Draco sniffs, a bit disdainfully. His hair slides through Harry's fingers like water, and his skin is soft and warm, and Harry resists the urge to pull him into his lap, because that's not exactly appropriate hospital visitation behaviour.

The best Healers in the country all sent back a negative prognosis. Healer after Healer shook his or her sadly, "there's nothing we can do for him," they said, and although their hair colour and accents changed, the words were pretty much always the same. At one point Harry even got desperate enough to escort Draco to the Wizarding form of therapy (which was considered a new-fangled and rather unresearched manner of treatment). Even after paying for a clinical hour in which Draco stared at food stains on the wall and called out names of animals, Harry was willing enough to believe (and that was part of healing, wasn't it? Keeping a positive attitude) that he paid for two months' worth of sessions. He didn't stop until after the Big Balloon therapy – even he had to admit that that was a little much.

Muggle psychiatrists were out of the question, of course; they would have no idea what to do with a Magical Mind. Not to mention that they were likely to have Harry committed the moment they heard that the cause of trauma was a snake-faced Dark Lord. Hermione still sends him psychiatry texts anyway, along with any other articles that she finds on diseases of the mind.

"Incurable," they said.

"There's no help for it," they said.

"I'm very, very sorry, but I'm afraid that..."

But I'm Harry Potter, Harry almost insisted, plaintively, and then he was immediately ashamed for it. There was nothing that they could do for him, and it had little to do with lack of trying.

"Have you tried looking into brain surgery?" Ron asked one day. "I've heard wonderful things about brain surgery. They just cut you open and fiddle around in the grey matter in there and maybe they put some stuff in or take some stuff out and you're fixed, just like that!" He had smiled, completely self-assured, with the air of one who knows exactly what he is talking about.

"Er, I don't think brain surgery works that way, Ron..." Harry had said.

"Sure, be all negative about it without even giving it some fair consideration," Ron said. "I think it's a very good suggestion. Nothing else works, anyhow. Plus," he added as a bonus, "they shave all his hair off. Imagine his reaction when he's himself again!"

Harry didn't think that this suggestion was very fair. Ron, after all, had never liked Draco, and for him, it is a win-win situation.

The long, thin strands of pale silky hair, tangled in the dark teeth of the brush, reminds him of the thin strings of memory he's pulled out into his own Pensieve. To clear his head, as Dumbledore had once said, and then the past is perfect and clear but the present is too foggy by comparison. He's tried to use Legilimency, once, to see into Draco's head. Surely the memories were in there somewhere, no matter how jumbled or locked away they might be. When he entered at first, he imagined crashing through a great brick wall.

There was no brick wall, no door with a lock keeping him out. Instead of memories with people and places, he was bombarded with a billion scents and colours and sensations, sense memories. There was no coherency. The thoughts rambled. There were people and faces but no particular scenes or events, or sometimes the wrong people in the wrong locations.
If he could put Draco's thoughts into words, it would have probably been something like:

Draco likes Harry days best. On the other days, the stars didn't look quite so rainbow, not quite so right. But the days when Harry comes it is all warm inside and outside and inside again, like drinking a big glass of buttery sunlight. Harry means big smiles and warm words and hugs sometimes and sweets sometimes and both are good, yeah.
Harry's eyes are green, just like grass and snakes and green-apple lollipops. Draco likes all of these things, so it is nice when Harry looks at him, even when Harry's eyes are wet, sometimes.

But of course the present would be jumbled, so he pulls further back, deeper and deeper, back into the time when things should still make sense. But there it's like there's a shroud that's all cobwebs and snake-fangs, lined with thorns for the hell of it.

This man is a Bad Man, and he is going to hurt, and the hurt is bad and Draco hates it.

"NO NO NO NO!" Draco screams.

Hurting hurting pain and black and it's warm and wet and that shouldn't be so wet there's so much red red eyes red wet screaming screaming

He retreated so quickly he fell back, his own head hurting, and Draco staring at him with wide grey eyes, uncomprehending. Harry doesn't try any more, after that. There is nothing to do, after all. Nothing but to keep visiting Draco and to keep bringing him sweets and to keep reminding himself that the price of arsenic is up these days, and it really isn't worth that long walk to the pharmacy.

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-"Pacifism is simply undisguised cowardice."-

Lying in bed in the Gryffindor dormitories, Harry saw into Malfoy's mind in his dreams.

There must have been a satisfying crunch under his shoe, sickening and wet. Maybe he could feel the cartilage and skin and bone just yield and then mash to a pulp underneath him. The sound travelled up his leg, throughout his entire body, all the way up before settling with a splash in the acid wash of your stomach. It feels good in the worst way, horrible in the best way.

For breakfast he covered everything in a thick layer of raspberry jam.

Ron turned to him, beginning to talk about how he suspected that the house elves were sneaking his undergarments, because they were somehow missing. His mouth was full of scones, so he was spraying crumbs as he did, and Hermione looked about to be nauseous over either the horrid table manners or the inherent house elf discrimination.

The muffin didn't really smush into him as per the hopes of the thrower, but rather it bounced off of his head. It actually even hurt a little – what were the house elves making muffins out of these days, flour and ground-up brick? – and it left a smear of butter in his hair, yellow and thick and slicking some of the strands together like edible hair gel. A surprise attack! Of all the sneaky, underhanded things...

He whirled around, to see, predictably, who else could it be but –

No one.

Still, Harry was not to be deterred by this lack of person, because there was only one person who was evil enough to do things like initiate food fights at this ungodly hour of morning.

"Ah, Potter," Malfoy said, already healed, apparently, from the scuffle of a few days previous. Madam Pomfrey was a magic-woman with those wounds, which, Harry supposed, made sense. "I like your new pomade."

Pansy snickered. Goyle whispered loudly, "What's a pomade?" and had to be explained to.

"Thanks," Harry said casually, shocking Malfoy into silence. "Maybe you'd like to try some."

The butter really looked better all over Malfoy's hair than his own. All over Malfoy's face, in fact, smeared as Harry rubbed it around. The butter dish dropped to the floor with a clatter.

Malfoy didn't even make an attempt to punch him. With a shriek that could deafen a banshee his hands were on him, and Harry was treated to roughly about 9 stone of tall blonde boy trying to throttle him within an inch of his life.

Not that he wasn't giving back as good as he got.

In any other school, in any other life, Harry sort of guessed that a muffin-to-the-head would have instantly meant food fight. But that was other schools, and other lives, and other boys, who all presumably had never known a being quite as evil as *Malfoy*, and in this moment his primary concern was dashing that stupid blonde hard against the flagstones.

It was going very fine and well, splendidly, actually, until they were almost literally thrown apart by Professor McGonagall.

"Just what exactly is wrong with the two of you?" she demanded of them.

What was wrong with the two of them? Well, Harry could say, I'm an orphan and I've been abused for years by my own horrible aunt and uncle, and at eleven I had to face the Most Evil Wizard of Our Time, and since then I've known I'm probably going to have to save the world, and just recently I lost my godfather-cum-father-figure in a way that allows me to fully blame myself.

That could be a clue to what was wrong with Harry.

And as for Malfoy? Well, he was just a little shit. It was probably genetic or something.

McGonagall continued to lecture.

"You both know better than this. Honestly! Harry Potter! Draco Malfoy! For shame!"

Harry resisted the urge to say but *he* started it.

"I don't know what's gotten into you two," Professor McGonagall scolded, her mouth set into an upset line – the most upset that Harry had ever seen lines be, actually. It was a very ridiculous scolding, because she really ought to have known by now how things were between him and Malfoy; although, granted, they had never been up to initiating something so very early in the morning. "But this has got to stop. Fifty house points from the both of you, and the next time I catch you at it, you'll both be suspended from Quidditch – *indefinitely*."

Harry looked at her in shock; surely she wouldn't, not when he was Captain and he knew that she needed him to win that Cup this year. With a grim look she nodded; although, it stood to reason that at least Malfoy would be suspended, too, dealing both teams a crucial blow.

Perhaps Hufflepuff would win this year.

With a gulp Harry nodded, and then his eyes were on Malfoy, hating him with every last cell of his body and making sure that he knew it. Malfoy, on the other hand, simply looked contemplative – no, scheming, actually; he wasn't very good at being subtle when it came to his scheming.

Look at me, Harry almost shouted, and didn't.

They were then both treated to a long lecture about fighting against school regulations, and how they really ought to have known better, by this age. She made it as publicly humiliating as possible, citing her disappointment in both of them, although it was probably a better alternative to Snape, who would have punished Harry thoroughly and Malfoy none at all. Students returned to their breakfast, groaning because neither Harry nor Malfoy had won, and only Blaise Zabini had thought to bet on the "fight gets broken up by authority figure" outcome.

Finally, battered and buttered, they were both sent back to their respective tables, ordered to *Scourgify* and then prepare to go to class.

And it was in this way that Professor McGonagall effectively put an end to their fighting.

At least in public.

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-"Misery won't touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you...""-

There's a new bulletin on the board outside of the unit today: a piece of pink parchment advertising the Spring Social. A dance. For the patients in the unit, as if they, too, should dress up in their best robes and ask each other out and use Sleekeazy's hair potion to smooth out their matted, ratty, food-encrusted hair. The poster features flowery magenta script and dancing figures all over, happily waltzing the night away. Harry stares at it until his eyes water and the figures blur together so that they look like they're doing something illegal and physically improbable with a llama.

Harry can't keep this up. He goes to see Draco more and more these days – (not like he has anything better to do, really, his Friday nights wouldn't even make a nun jealous) - but each time he can stand it less and less. As soon as Draco's in his arms, like a bundle of warmth and sunlight, everything is okay. But before that...before that, Hell must be like those moments before that.

When the nurse undoes the lock from the other side, the double-doors to the unit swing wide open. Harry walks in and he thinks he smells death. Or madness, at least. The air is thick and sickly with it.

What he really is smelling is lunchtime, the processed and steamed food overpowering, floating on a wave of mixed scents: lemon cleaner and antiseptic masking urine and shit – some of these patients too crazy to even stop from messing themselves. He can think that word, crazy, even if he can't say it, because that's all this unit really is, isn't it, a madhouse.

It's like the asylums of yore, where they locked up the prisoners and shocked them with electricity, let them be mad and foam at the mouth, and maybe people would come around once a month or so to cut their hair for wigs. Draco's hair might have made for a nice wig, once, but now it is too dull. There's no bars here, no locked rooms and certainly no jailer with his big set of keys on a ring, but the desolate air is the same, that sense of things floating and lost and wandering.

It is, however, better than Azkaban. At least here they're clean and the nurses don't try to suck your face.

Well, not for the most part, anyway. Harry doesn't altogether trust the night shift.

What Harry can't stand anymore, really, is all their empty eyes. Draco is better than that, than those empty eyes.

Harry doesn't want to face them, doesn't want to think about what doesn't lie behind them, and moreover, he doesn't want them looking at what is his. He didn't mind it so much once but it's all he can think about, now. He can't really explain it, but it's like, the idea of the dead things staring at the one live thing in this white-walled place, staring at the thing that he likes to look at...he doesn't want to share that gaze. He doesn't want to look at Draco and feel their eyes.

There's the one who set himself on fire, who is all scars and pink shiny smooth flesh now. There's Gilderoy Lockhart, as broken as ever. Sometimes he comes over and tries to talk.
He's happy, though, at least. Or at least he seems happy. Maybe cheerful.

It makes Harry uneasy.

There's the one who cries all day, his face wet and marked with tear-tracks, eyes sandy-white and crusty. And there's the one that laughs at everything. Harry wishes that he could just think that he seems happy too, but there's something that's even more terrifying about laughing all the time, rather than just crying.

This isn't exactly the type of crowd that Harry thinks of as the dance party kind.

They're ghosts, drifting in and out of this place, shadows of people, gliding about in their robes of off-colour white, sometimes in inoffensive light blue, the kind you never see in the real world, in real life. Ghosts, like the Grey Lady, who was always so quiet and sad, and Nearly Headless Nick, who would spend the rest of eternity hanging on by a thread. Draco isn't like that, these ghosts, he's warm and he's alive. He's not who Draco Malfoy once was, he's someone else, someone different, but at least he's *someone*, at least he's a person.

He bumps into someone in the hallway. "Oh, sorry!" he says quickly, before he looks up to see. This person is limp yellow hair, yellowed brown eyes, crusts of yellow in the corners of his eyes.

Another ghost, then. "*French* film," the ghost declaims. "French film, French fish, fresh fish, catsup, catsup—" His voice sounds more like an echo, and Harry recalls an echo, once, in a Great Hall, somewhere - And now, for a few words: nitwit, blubber, oddment, tweak. He shudders and walks quickly away and before he knows it, his pen is

moving on the papers, signing 'Harry James Potter.' A Medical Director, with thin wire glasses and a big rubber stamp, a pad of red ink, receives the papers. He probably has stamps with ominous words like "DENIED" and "INSANE" and "DECEASED", and it could be any of them that he chooses to put down, any of them that could ruin Harry all over again, that red ink like so much blood, if he wants to get melodramatic about it. (He is feeling kind of melodramatic, these days, and his taste in music reflects that.) The scroll of parchment comes back "ACCEPTED FOR RELEASE."

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-"Violence is the ultimate human degradation."-

The small piece of parchment read:

Potter, you stupid arse –
Third floor. Outside of the statue of the humpbacked witch. If you dare.
Harry almost expected it to say, "Be there or be square."

He recognised a challenge when he saw one, lame as it may be, and he was prepared to face it.

He took his Invisibility Cloak in case it was a trap, and shrugged it off around the corner when it wasn't – just Malfoy standing there, his stupid hair all glowy in the moonlight. He looked a little lost, a little impatient, and when Harry had stared at him for a while and he looked like he was about to leave, it was then that he appeared and stopped him.
"What the hell do you want, Malfoy?" Harry said, expecting to be jumped on by Crabbe and Goyle even this late in the game. Because Malfoy was Malfoy, and he did Malfoy-ian things, like plot plans for the sole purpose of having Harry foil them.

Malfoy looked only slightly startled, and for a moment his face showed a flash of –what? Relief? Fear? – something, gone too quickly to identify.

"Hit me," Malfoy said simply.

"Wait, what?"

What? Really now, what? Harry blinked at the blonde, taken aback by the response. He could have taken anything else into stride – death threats, an attempt on his life, even a rehashing of the Triwizard Tournament, where Ron would be there under the lake with all those horrid mermaids that were ugly in real life and he'd have to pay ransom or something to get him back. All appropriately evil things for Malfoy to do.

But for Malfoy to *ask* to be hit, this sort of masochism coming from the boy who had whined and whimpered like a pansy (to Pansy, too) at a ripped robe, the barest of scratches from a hippogriff – it was unthinkable. Uncharacteristic.

It had to be a trap.

Crabbe or Goyle was probably around the corner, just waiting to record him beating on pathetic, defenceless Malfoy so that he could tattle to McGonagall and get Harry suspended from Quidditch, a brilliantly evil plan for Slytherin to win the House Cup in this most essential year of years. Maybe they'd even stolen poor little Colin Creevey's camera to document the deed.

Malfoy sighed in a long-suffering manner, as if Harry had failed to grasp that perhaps one and one equalled two, and the sky was blue, sometimes. "Have I finally done it? One too many blows to the head and you've gone deaf, or perhaps you've just gone stupid? I said, hit me."

"I know what you said," Harry snapped back, instinctively. "But why would you—how could you -- You're barking mad," Harry said.

"And you're absolutely pathetic, Potter," Malfoy countered.

"I'm not going to just...hit you!" Harry said. It was unnecessary to mention, of course, that up until this point he had had no problem hitting Malfoy. But that wasn't the point.

"No, of course not," Malfoy agreed. "There's nobody around to see, now is there? Not so brave, are you, without your little fanclub to cheer you on?"

"You're one to talk about brave, stepping on people's faces when they're Petrified," Harry retorted.

A slow smile spread its way across Malfoy's face, as if savouring the memory, his mouth almost humming a little, as if just the thought of it tasted particularly nice, like a sweet. "I never said I was brave," a shrug, a smooth roll of shoulders. "You probably think running into the jaws of death year after year is considered *brave*. It's not brave, it's just plain stupidity. Mixed in with a good amount of your attention-whoring tendencies."

Harry bristled; he could feel his hand clenching itself into a fist without notifying his brain of its decision to do so. "It's smart to ask for a beating, is it?"

Malfoy didn't reply to that. Instead he sneered, infuriatingly, as if he knew the answers to all the secrets ever, and Harry felt much the same way he did when Malfoy brewed a perfect Amortentia potion, praised by Snape, of course, where his own had the nasty side effect of giving people warts in sensitive places.

Suddenly, it didn't matter why Malfoy would want him to hit him, whether it was that he had managed to cast some sort of Charm that would make Harry's own attack hit him back tenfold, or whether it was that he had Rita Skeeter waiting in the wings, like a beetle on the wall, to write her new exposé on "Harry Potter, Bully of the Blonde and Defenceless, Raper of Babies." What mattered was that Malfoy had called him all the way out here to make this strange, masochistic request of him, and like *hell* he was going to give Malfoy what he wanted.

"Do you want to hit me or not?" Malfoy asked, casually.

Yes. "No!"

Malfoy sighed. "I knew I expected too much from you to ask; you just can't do it."

But then again, maybe it was reverse psychology. Hermione had been using that on Ron lately.

("Maybe I don't want you to do your Transfiguration homework."

"Wait, why wouldn't you want me to do your Transfiguration homework? Do you think I can't do my Transfiguration homework? I'll show you who can or can't do their Transfiguration homework!")

Of course Malfoy wouldn't want to be hit; he was a coward who was perpetually running to save his own skin. Which meant, of course, that Harry should give him the beating that he was practically on his knees begging for.

If it was reverse psychology, that meant Malfoy really didn't *want* Harry to hit him (which would make sense) and by *not* giving him what he wanted, Harry was actually giving him exactly what he wanted.

Ow. His head hurt, and nothing had even happened yet. This was a truly evil plan.

"You're touched in the head, Malfoy," Harry said. For some reason, whatever reason, he did not turn around and walk away. Walking away from a challenge was perhaps not amongst his list of things that he associated with himself. He was probably physically incapable of it, just like Malfoy was physically incapable of being tolerable.

"You can't do anything right, can you, Potter?" Malfoy continued.

"Forgive me if I don't place my life in your incompetent hands."

"Right, you'd rather place your life in the scaly hands of the Dark Lord," said Harry. And some part of him knew that he shouldn't, but - "It sure helped your father."

Grey eyes glittered and narrowed.

"My father will get out of prison in due time, Potter, and he'll be in one whole piece. Can't exactly say the same for your parents...or even your little *dog*, hm?"

Harry couldn't help it.

He hit him.

One moment he had been standing in place, fist clenched but ready to turn around and go, and the next, his fist was colliding, rather solidly, with Malfoy's jaw.

He couldn't even see him as a person anymore, could not think in words or images, could only feel the black sensation of connection, and the bright red of pain.

Truth be told, Harry had been increasingly irritable the last couple of days. Because they were expressly not allowed to fight (anywhere they could be caught, at least) Malfoy seemed to delight in going out of his way in order to needle him, again and again and again. He knocked against him in the halls, as if pretending not to see him. The sharp, bony shoulder dug into his, like a blunt blade, and no, Harry didn't want to fight him at all, never mind that all the times that he'd passed by him in the halls in the past week he'd just barely checked himself from giving in to the urge to jump Malfoy and beat him down where he stood.

Hermione worried, a bit, too much, of course – she said that Harry had been withdrawn, could not comprehend that unprecedented unprovoked show of violence. Harry could barely comprehend it himself and didn't want to either be lectured or constantly have to tell her, "yes, I'm fine!" when asked if he was okay. Everything seemed to irritate him, and he didn't know what Malfoy was talking about when he had viciously called him a timed explosive psychomaniac waiting to lose it. He didn't mean to be rude to Ron when he stole something from his plate at breakfast, as he tended to do, and he didn't mean to snap at Hermione for note-taking too much.

Harry didn't think that he'd be feeling it, really, since before Malfoy had actually asked him to do it, and he never ever wanted to do what Malfoy wanted him to do. He hadn't been in the mood; you couldn't just ask a person to get *into* it like that.

Only once he hit him, it was all surprisingly easy. Everything was easy. It was easy to wrestle him to the ground, easy to avoid the fist aimed for the head, easy to get the fist in his stomach, easy to feel his own head smacked into the floor.

With no audience watching, it was still the same as before, even though he had heard the crowd both times what mattered was Malfoy under his hands, gritting his teeth and hitting him back.

They went on until both were panting and exhausted, glazed with a sheen of sweat. No major damage this time – could they afford it? Out in the hall at night as they were, when Mrs. Norris could come by at any moment?

Neither would give up; Harry managed to somehow flip Malfoy onto his back, but the blonde tripped him up and he crashed to the ground. By the end of it, everything was sore and ringing and they had tired themselves out.

When he was tired, (head ringing, bleeding from his lip, staring at the ceiling) Harry didn't feel so angry anymore, but he didn't know what to say. What did one say after something like this? Good fight? I'm sorry I didn't hurt you more? Yes, I was trying to kill you, you twat?

Malfoy saved him the trouble. After they seemed to come to an unspoken standstill, he simply got up and walked away.

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-"In the country of pain, we are each alone."-

"Draco," Harry says, "Draco, you won't have to be in the hospital anymore."

Draco should hate hospitals. After all, Harry does. And Draco should want to live with him, to be taken care of by someone who knew what he needed.

Or maybe, maybe Draco shouldn't ever want any more than this, to be happy when Harry just looks at him, perpetually delighted, perpetually easy to please.

Real Draco wasn't like that, of course, Real Draco was horribly difficult to please, and for real Draco Harry just being Harry and here wouldn't have ever been enough. He misses that even if he hated it once, misses the way that Draco was practically impossible to deal with. God, he even misses how annoying he was. But he still feels a flush of pleasure with the way this Draco smiles and turns into his touch.

"N-no h-h-hoss-pital?" Draco echoes. Harry frowns at that tremulous voice, suddenly irritated with it and not sure why, like an unlocated itch from the unseen spider hiding in your bed.

"No more hospital," Harry says quickly, almost sharply.

No more Healers who can't Heal, no more ineffective Potions, no more fake flowers and cheap bleached cotton sheets, no more crazy roommates and empty-eyed ghosts all around.

No more Tuna Day, that was for sure.

Because it shouldn't be like this. (Nothing should ever, ever be like Tuna Day – that was cruel and unusual.)

Not this, not here, when his next breath is filled with the lemon scent covering up that subtle smell of urine from when the guy down the hall pissed himself. Not here with the fake flowers that would be collecting dust if not for the fact that they were achingly clean with the swish of a wand. They're enchanted to smell and feel just like real flowers, upon closer inspection, but they never grow, never change. Never die. Every room has at least one wall with these bright blobs of colour on it, like children's drawings – that change shape, now a

giraffe, now a zebra, now a smiling, happy face. They're supposed to be soothing. Harry personally thinks they're sick. There's an aquarium outside with a grindylow named Maurice. Draco's robes are grey and he looks dingy, washed out, the sleeves hang especially loose on his wrists. How many sick people had worn them before him, how many would wear them afterwards? How many people had messed themselves in them, how many had made a mess – whether it was with food or something else, like the guy in room 121B who could not stop wanking, watching the other patients and their visitors. The nurses had to apply ointments to his down-theres, Harry overheard, and he often winced in sympathy – when he was exceedingly depressed he had once done it 7 times in one day, and had to stop when he started to develop a blister.

There is an almost overwhelming scent of coffee; Harry had bought it for him from the trendy coffee shop on the corner. They sold coffee for two sickles in the cafeteria downstairs, but Draco always turned away from it, declared it "icky," no matter how much cream and sugar Harry had tried to persuade him with. It was a relief to pay the overpriced nine sickles for coffee, instead, the silver coins heavy in his hand.

Draco smiles at Harry cautiously.

The Healer knocks on the door. He's that arsehole Healer that says "condition" – not like it's some sort of disease or something disgusting, but more in a bored way. Like he's given up before he even tried. He's young, brown hair and thin spectacles, a smile; Harry's been to his office, has seen the pictures on his desk of the happy young wife and their happy ickle baby all smiling and cooing and dancing around inside the silver frames. These are the people he saved, the ones he defeated evil for, so that Baby can grow up in a Dark-Lord-free world. So that this particular Healer can go home to his nice little house and take his nice little wife upstairs to their nice little bedroom for a nice little fuck. Harry's delivered them from evil, saved them from a life in servitude to some snake-faced reptilian Overlord and how do they thank him? With "I'm sorry, the damage is irreversible." Can't even save this one person, Draco Malfoy – who, come now, Draco, you know this - never was as important as he always thought he was, a small insignificant thing in the grand scheme of things, really, a grain of sand on the beach of life, surely, an ant in the grass of God's Quidditch pitch.

They couldn't even do this little thing for him.

Harry subtly shifts his chair so that his body is between that man and Draco.

"Hello, Draco," the Healer chirps. *Call him Mr. Malfoy*, Harry bristles but he doesn't correct him.

Draco isn't concerned with him, after all. Draco doesn't have eyes for anybody but Harry. And isn't this what Harry always wanted, all of Malfoy's attention, all for himself? Sure, it's almost disturbing in its complete single-mindedness now, but that shouldn't bother him so much.

"Going home today, are we?" says the Healer, as if speaking to a small child. Harry doesn't like it, and his hand tightens on Draco's wrist.

Draco nods in lieu of answering. His grey eyes watch Harry. Harry is watching the Healer himself, the smooth lines of his face, the falsely cheerful blue eyes, uncaring, the large dark mole just on one side of his chin. He hopes that it's cancer.

"Now," says the Healer, turning to Harry, "I'm sure you've already been spoken to about the various things you'll need to take care of, now that Draco is going home. "

Here to say his goodbyes, Harry supposes. Perhaps to express his relief that he won't have to see this patient anymore, this patient who lives and breathes here and takes up space and is technically in his care but there's no caring to do.

What does it matter, after all? It's not a physical ailment that afflicts Draco. No amount of Skele-Gro can grow back what's been broken. There are no special potions that he needs to take; they're placebos, really, not for Draco's sake, but more for Harry, who always insists that there is something that can be done.

Harry pours himself a glass of water. He takes a sip from it and leaves it on the table.

Harry is going to take him away from all this, from the vile potions that taste like cruddy oil but do nothing, from all those horrible, suffocating smells, from the Healers who've long stopped poking and prodding and have since given up. He can rescue him, still, even if his figurative hero-cape has been hung up for seven years now.

The Healer runs down a list of do's and don'ts. Harry listens half-heartedly, mentally willing for him to leave or for his head to explode,

whichever comes first. When he finally finishes he gives a fake smile and reaches out to touch Draco or something, maybe give him a handshake?

What a dick.

Harry intercepts the touch and shakes his hand, before it even comes near Draco's skin.

"Congratulations, Draco," the Healer says, even though it's a pretty inappropriate thing to say. It's not as if he's done anything great, after all – but perhaps this is like one of those big events, like a wedding or a new baby, that you just say 'congratulations' for. "Good luck and take care."

"Thanks," says Harry drily. "And we will."

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-"In violence, we forget who we are."-

Sleeping with a body covered in bruises, no matter how soft the bed, wasn't exactly comfortable. Harry would consider it akin to something like sleeping lying down in a large barrel full of stones, and it would have been impossible if not for the fact that he was blissfully tired. He slept, a stone amongst stones, and stones did not dream.

He was sore in the morning, tender, like a piece of meat that had been beaten with a mallet. He avoided Ron and Hermione (the former who was sleeping like a corpse, that is, if corpses could snore, and the latter distractedly doing some advance reading for her Arithmancy lesson) and stopped by Madam Pomfrey's instead. When she asked him what happened he said that a door opened on him, which was the best that he could come up with on short notice.

"A door," she repeated, evenly.

"They're rather dangerous," Harry had supplied, perhaps a bit too hopefully.

The Dark Lord would have to be stooping pretty low, but hey, it could happen. First evil doors, evil chairs and tables next. Dudley had always thought that lamps were evil, ever since that one time that Harry was probably all of six and it had crashed to the floor in front of him, blocking his rotund cousin's path.

Fortunately for Harry, Madame Pomfrey wasn't above the idea of evil-infused furniture. Well, either that or she was actually all too delighted for a patient to really care about the actual misfortune that brought him into her capable, Healing hands.

Her eyes gleamed with unholy, sent-by-the-Dark-Lord-Himself light as she made him show her his wounds, as she squeezed into each bruise and scrape to see him wince, and asked him to assess his pain, on a scale of one to ten. She even had a poster of a helpful chart illustrating faces for each number, in case you couldn't speak or someone hexed your voice away or something. Number one was a vaguely-smiling face and number ten was in tears.

Harry really didn't see the need for all those gleaming sharp metal instruments, though. It wasn't like she actually planned to use them, right? That was what *magic* was for, wasn't it?

Much pain and plenty of bandages afterwards, Harry couldn't figure out why Malfoy had approached him that way, had sought him out just to fight. He did know, however, that he had not dreamt of death, nor Sirius, nor red-eyed Dark Lords and how and who they wanted to kill.

Putting the proper person into his proper place forced Harry to do some re-evaluations on all the people around him. Ron and Hermione just wanted to help, after all, and it couldn't be helped if they just didn't get it so much of the time. He watched Ron watch Hermione touch the quill to her lips before scribbling furiously away at her latest essay. Ron looked up and caught his eye and laughed a little nervously; clapped him on the back and Harry winced only slightly because of a bruise. Later on Ron would convince him to try out his new cheat deck of Exploding Snap cards and accidentally catch Hermione's hair on fire in the process – "Barely even a fire," Ron would claim, when hiding from Hermione in a cupboard. "She's really blowing this all out of proportion. It's a little more singed than anything. You can't even see it if she keeps her head tilted at the right angle!"

It was good to have friends. Ron was good people. Hermione was smart and diligent and kind. Gryffindors were good people. He didn't mind when Neville slipped on that pod in Herbology and ended up covering him with banana slugs. He didn't even have the urge to rip up his homework parchment when Snape singled him out to give him an impossibly long assignment. He overheard Seamus remarking to Dean that he was either finally over his PMS, or that he had finally gotten laid.

Beating up Malfoy made life better. Somehow, Harry couldn't be too surprised at this.

As for Malfoy, maybe he was a closet masochist all along. He did live in a dungeon after all. Maybe this was something all Slytherins were secretly kind of into. Of course, his evil treacherous brain then had to go and supply images of Snape, Millicent Bulstrode, and Crabbe and Goyle decked out in whips and chains and leather and little else and he began to understand the appeal of blunt trauma to the head.

Strangely enough, Malfoy began to avoid him after the incident. As the bruises faded, so did Malfoy's presence from his life, it seemed, and he saw him little outside of mealtimes, where he was always surrounded by his (possibly kinky) housemates.

When he did see him, the blonde even refused to make eye contact. As if he couldn't look Harry in the face, now, not after what had transpired between them. Hallways, dining halls, class – something about the Slytherin looked particularly shifty, even moreso than usual, which was a difficult task.

Harry would never understand Malfoy, not really, but he knew when he was Up to Something.

He unfurled the Marauder's Map and watched him. The same way that, year after year, he sought out the blonde head at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, his eyes zeroed in on the little moving black dot with the script that read Draco Malfoy.

What was he doing? Where was he going? Why was he acting so strangely?

He cornered him late one night down in the dungeons to ask these very important questions, but Harry had never prided himself on being tactful or eloquent. He ended up hitting him, instead.

This time, they went to the Infirmary together.

"Ow!" said Malfoy, "ow! Ow! Ow!"

Malfoy whined an awful lot.

"Hold still," Madam Pomfrey said firmly, grasping his arm as she poured the bubbling liquid over a wound.

Harry couldn't help laughing, even though it hurt his bruised ribs.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Malfoy demanded. "Augh! What is that? What does it do?"

"What is that? What does that do? is it going to burn my skin off?"

"OH GOD WHAT IS THIS, ACID? IT'S ACID, ISN'T IT," Malfoy cried, generally making a scene. "MY SKIN IS MELTING OFF! HELP! HELP!"

Harry's ribs really hurt by this point.

"Don't tell me you're going to have to amputate. You're going to have to amputate, aren't you?"

The blonde was now staring at his arm as if it had become dead zombie flesh that he did not recognize, mutating as he watched the

liquid foam and bubble, healing his wounds. "YOU'RE TRYING TO MELT ME DOWN TO MY BONES FOR YOUR TWISTED MEDICAL EXPERIMENTS."

To which Madame Pomfrey calmly replied, "Don't be ridiculous. I already have a skeleton, and his name is Horatio."

Malfoy glared at her. "I hope you have a good lawyer." He then turned his glare onto Harry. "Same goes for you, Potter. This is nothing short of cruel and unusual."

"Can't we cast Silencio or something on him?" Harry asked.

"No," Madam Pomfrey answered him, reaching for the next liquid.

Maybe Malfoy was right, she really was spitefully cruel.

"Wait till the Daily Prophet hears of this, mauled in the hallways!" Malfoy cried, as his arm was stabilised and slowly bandaged. "Innocent student attacked by the Boy-Who Lived!"

Harry spluttered."But you started it!"

Malfoy gave him a look of complete and utter disdain, "No one told you that you had to join in."

Someone like that was unbearable.

It felt good to hit Malfoy, felt good afterwards, to hurt him. The feel of a knee in his gut, so that he doubled over, the feel of grabbing all that pale blonde hair and yanking him back, watching him grit his teeth.

The sickening crunch of bone when his fist met – not his nose, but one of those damnedly sharp cheekbones, sharp as a piece of broken porcelain. Only that it was Malfoy that got cut, not Harry.

He caught him when he was alone, always, in conveniently secluded corridors, the entrances of classrooms empty for the day.

It began without a word the next time. Harry didn't like to talk. Malfoy did, Malfoy liked to talk too much – his mouth pouring out vitriol and insults, each one of them sharp like a winged thing with teeth of its own. He was a wasp, a hornet, this annoying insect that could sting, again and again.

Because he deserved this. Because no one else could pay for Sirius and Malfoy would have to do. Because he had made the wrong decision

and he was evil even though he was just Harry's age, and Harry didn't even know what he was doing, half the time.

Malfoy bruised rather pretty, dark purple if he left it too long, the exact same shade as an eggplant.

Harry got used to the taste of blood.

Madame Pomfrey, according to Malfoy, was a sadistic maniac. Harry told him that he was just a maniac, but it was true that she poked and prodded their wounds and bruises for a very long time before using Episkey.

"An unnecessarily and excruciatingly long and painful time," Malfoy interjected, discussing it as Harry was bandaged.

"Sissy," Harry said, and then, "Owwwww!"

Madame Pomfrey came to expect them. She took a brutal sort of delight in their treatments, and the more damaged they were, the more broken and bruised, the happier she was to see them.

He was beginning to look like an abused housewife.

"Are you still fighting with Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

Sweet Hermione, so well-meaning and proper, a prefect who'd of course disapprove. There was no way that she could understand.

"What?" Harry answered. "No, no, of course not."

"Ahem," she said, and poked a fading bruise on his cheek, just under his eye.

"Ow!" said Harry.

"You're not doing what now?"

"What, that?" Harry shook her off. "I fell."

She gave him a Look, but he was pretty sure she bought it.

"I'm very clumsy," he added, just to seal the deal. It was one of the many adjectives Malfoy had for him, along with oafish, stupid, moronic, idiotic, bloody, fucking, blasted (when he was being particularly villain-esque), and nincompoopy.

"You are the bane of my very existence," Malfoy said. "If your mother had lived, she would have soon killed herself just to avoid the embarrassment of having you for a child. Just looking at you makes me nauseous. Your face looks like something your neck chewed up and regurgitated to feed to its little neckling young, with black hair sticking out of it. You've got a Hero's complex that you didn't earn, you're idiotic and mostly lucky, you're an embarrassment to all wizarding kind, it's no wonder your horrible Muggles shoved you away in a broom cupboard, I really hope you die, you're arrogant and your sense of entitlement is—"

Malfoy broke off suddenly in the middle of his tirade, gave him an inquisitive look and simply said, "Potter, you're a dick."

Harry thought that this was an unfair judgement. If anybody deserved to be called a part of the male anatomy, it was Malfoy. In fact, Malfoy wasn't just a part of the male anatomy, he was the whole genitalia. Malfoy was such a dick that he was the dick and balls, the whole shebang, pubes, too, probably.

If anything, Malfoy was a giant penis!

This of course conjured very strange images and Harry had to punch him. The packing, smacking sound of flesh hitting flesh rang in his ears.

Later Harry sat in class and tongued a loose tooth that he would need Madame Pomfrey to fix, as much as he dreaded it. He could taste the thin trickle of blood from the cut on his gum; he swallowed it down.

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-"The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."-

The journey home is a slow one. Because it's been so long since Draco's actually been free, Harry helps him change into the Muggle clothes that he's bought for him –doing it as quickly as possible, barely even eyeing all that pale flesh- and they take the tube and walk instead of Apparating. He's chosen a soft grey jumper for him (kitten soft, as it was noted) that makes his grey eyes look blue and a pair of denim jeans.

The jumper was just a little bit big for him – they didn't feed him right there, the abusive bastards, or had Draco been unwilling to eat? He is a brat, after all, and then Harry dismisses it. Draco would have said something like, *"Oh, yes, I'm watching my figure. Really, Potter, the malnourished prisoner look is very chic this year."*

The too-big jumper exposes just a bit too much collarbone. Don't look, I'm indecent, Draco might have once drawled, even as he posed at just the right angle for the jumper to slip and expose even more pale skin. This Draco wears it casually, unnoticing, the too-long sleeves covering his wrists and half his palms.

Harry had asked for help from the store attendants; he prefers shopping at Muggle stores more these days, seeing as how the sales clerks are less likely to fawn all over him and try to offer his purchases for free. He wouldn't have been able to pick out this outfit on his own, of course, and he's sure that Draco never would have worn it, if he did. Even now, with the mind of a child, he probably still had that innate fashion sense.

Draco holds onto his sleeve, when he can't hold his hand.

When they get to the subway platform, Harry steps in front of him, keeping him back from the edge, far away from that too-thin yellow warning line. "Mind the gap," Harry says, unnecessarily, maybe, but the platform had been polite enough to remind him of its dangers, and it was only good manners to heed it. It would have been nice if more things came with warning labels.

They board the train with the afternoon crowd; just the beginning of the evening work rush home. Harry keeps a hand on Draco at all times, ready to reprimand him for shoving the other people out of the way. The reprimand is unnecessary, and so he clears his throat

instead.

The train rocks back and forth as it runs along the tracks under the city of London. Draco's eyes are everywhere, watching, taking it in, seeing it all for the first time. The light from the windows passes over his face in rectangular patches as the train tunnels through the belly of London, like some great speedy intestinal worm. The advertisements are bright but they don't move. Real Draco would have been seeing this for the first time, as well, Harry muses, and so this is okay because the reaction is similar, if not the same, and it's genuine.

People are staring at them, surely. A man in a crushed hat has wooly eyebrows that climb up his forehead, and he rustles his newspaper – the Times, not the Prophet – and hides his face behind it. A black woman in a crisp business suit looks over at them; she uncrosses and recrosses her legs, only going in the other direction. Then again, maybe no one is looking at them at all.

A man at the station wants to know if they want to buy flowers; live ones, freshly cut, their stems probably still bleeding green juice. Draco is more interested in the idea of balloons. The flower vendor's eyes roam over him, touching the coat that Harry's bought for him, eyes touching his too-long pale hair, his slender, willowy figure (thin, far too thin, Harry thinks). Harry watches the pale, exposed expanse of skin of Draco's bare neck and throat, that slice of collarbone. He watches the way his Adam's apple bobs a little when he makes a pleased sound at something. Harry thanks the vendor and then goes on to buy Draco a scarf from the stand nearby.

Harry gets him home in one piece, a victory both large and small on his part.

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-"No pain means death of feeling; each one of our joys is a bargain with the devil."-

There was no finesse to their fighting. A lot of it consisted of simply grabbing whatever they could, hands fisting in each other's robes, hands twisting around. His hands around Malfoy's throat as he struggled and writhed underneath him, like a large, pale flopping fish.

Malfoy, of course, fought dirty, every chance he got.

Malfoy even *bit*.

That little fucker.

"I'm watching you," Harry would growl, menacingly, "I've always got one eye wide open."

Mainly because, these days, with all the fighting they did, he tended to always have one eye swollen shut.

Malfoy, of course, when noticing that one eye was healing, would always punch the other one. To even it out, he said, bastard that he was.

"I've always been a passionate fan of aesthetic symmetry," he'd sneer.

Harry returned the favour by giving him a bloody nose.

"Just look at you two," Madame Pomfrey tsk'd. "Now how do you manage to consistently mess yourselves up so horribly?"

"He did it," they said in unison, each pointing at each other. Harry hated Malfoy all over again for stealing his line.

"Can't you just leave each other alone?" Madam Pomfrey said. "Honestly, next time I'm not administering any pain-relieving potions of any sort whatsoever."

That was the other perk of the Infirmary – the pain-relief. Madam Pomfrey's favourite pastime was to administer painful treatment and then deny the pain relief unless they had been "good boys."

God, maybe everyone in this school was a kinky sex maniac.

The pain-relieving potions, Malfoy said, were his favourite part. If

given the correct dosage the whole body went numb; no one could feel anything. Harry preferred the pain, how it made everything sharper, how it made him feel. He would work up a sweat and be sore and hurt all over afterwards and somehow it was good.
Malfoy, on the other hand, downed the potions (which, quite frankly, tasted like bitter mildew and were the consistency of slime) like pumpkin juice. He looked blissful afterwards, even pleasant.

"I think you're developing a problem," Harry told him.

"I don't need to develop a problem," Malfoy responded. "I already have a problem. Its name is Harry Potter, and it's really fucking annoying."

When Harry showered, his torso was a patchwork of colours: angry reds and dark purples, healing yellows and greens. He was filled with a flush of pleasure at the thought that Malfoy must look the same, if not worse, anaemic-looking as he was and all, with the tendency to bruise darker. (That weak, sickly pale look must come from all the inbreeding, Hermione said.) Red and purple marks tended to look better on pale skin, anyway, like marble stained with colour.

"Look at this," Madam Pomfrey might say over Harry's bared body, voice shushed with both awe and barely-suppressed enjoyment. "It's a wonder that there's no internal bleeding." She poked the soft area with her wand, just to watch him wince, his famous green eyes squeezing shut in pain.

It made him feel like a slice of meat, to be perfectly honest about it.

"Well, I'd apologise," said Malfoy, "but I hate lying."

"That was just a lie," Harry pointed out.

"Well, yes," said Malfoy, and he smiled nastily.

That satisfying crack, a strangled cry of pain. Insults screamed through a spray of blood.

"Glass jaw" was the term for it, Harry learned, when you were particularly vulnerable to a knockout punch. But Malfoy, despite his very good impression of a delicate boy, did not have a glass jaw. His was all pointy, all sharp corners, and even when Harry managed to land a punch there, he did not go down but rather came back fighting, even stronger than ever. There was no shattering here.

"You fight like a girl," Malfoy spat.

"At least I don't look like one," Harry countered.

Okay, okay, even Harry had to admit, they were running just a little low on material. But then it didn't matter, because with Malfoy's hands clenched around his neck, his blunt nails digging into his skin, the only thing that mattered was wrenching the blonde off of himself so that he could *hurt* him.

They started to get inventive with the excuses that they told Madame Pomfrey.

"I walked into a staircase," Harry said. At her sceptical look he added, "They...they move."

Malfoy was considerably better at lying. It figured, after all, it was probably a Slytherin Pureblood thing – Malfoy had probably been lying before he learned to speak. Harry would have bet anything that his first words were, "It wasn't me!"

"I was playing Quidditch," Malfoy might say, "diving for the Snitch when a Roc – the bird, not like, a big rock, you know - swooped down out of midair, intending to take me home to feed its young. Of course, since I am a bright, pretty, shiny thing, it would be attracted to me, and possibly want to keep me forever. I expertly dodged its clutches, escaping the grasp of its talons by a hair's breadth, but I fell off my broom in the process, and, of course, stupid Potter here got the Snitch, because he is oblivious to anyone's plight save his own."

Or:

"There I was, minding my own business, when I was absolutely mobbed by a giant mass of ardent ladies, each of them gone mad with lovesick passion. They tore off my robes and tore at my hair in an attempt to get a piece of me to take home with them. They molested me very hard. For a very long time. Some of them even attempted to violate my person, but alas, I do not fault these poor girls, for who could blame their youthful, romantic hearts? Yet, I was lucky to have escaped within an inch of my life."

"Oh?" asked Madame Pomfrey.

"Yes," replied Malfoy. And damn the bloody bastard, he was completely straight-faced throughout.

And also there was:

"There I was, innocently walking en route to Care of Magical Creatures, when I saw a gang of wild Sea Lions set upon a hapless young first year. Being Slytherin Prefect, of course it was my duty to defend him. I fought them valiantly, claw, tooth and nail, but sacrificed my fine, fine self in the process."

"You were attacked by sea lions?" Harry asked. This was ridiculous, even for Malfoy. "Those animals with whiskers and flippers and that balance red balls on the ends of their noses?"

A gang of sea lions, no less. He imagined that they had spike collars and leather jackets, to boot. The collars would have to be red, of course, to match the rubber balls. Perhaps they even waxed their moustaches and made them curl upwards and he had definitely been spending far too much time with that lunatic Malfoy.

"They're a type of Magical Creature, you pathetic simpleton," Malfoy had hissed back. "Go look it up."

"A Sea Lion, Harry?" Hermione asked later. "Why, yes, they're creatures with the forefront of a lion, webbed forepaws, a dorsal fin, and a fishy tail. One of those heraldic creatures, you know."

"Damn," Harry said. Now he owed Malfoy five Galleons.

"Why?" asked Hermione. "Is this a...you know...Dark Thing?"

"Erm..." Harry said.

It was Ron that saved him. "A fishy tale?" Ron asked. "You mean like the one about the guy who gets swallowed by the whale?"

Hermione proceeded to educate Ron about the Whereabouts, Diet, and Mating Habits of the Sea Lion while Harry contented himself by imagining Malfoy being beaten by a gang of circus sea lions, bouncing their red rubber balls off his stupid blonde head while barking.

And then there was that doubled-over feeling of being punched in the gut, the air forced out in one big rush of breath.

A spill of blood splattered across the flagstones, an image that was suddenly horrific. A small white object in that puddle of dark liquid and Harry realised that it was a tooth. It was at that point when he decided that this was getting ridiculous, and he really hoped that Wizard Dentistry was better than the Muggle kind. Hermione probably had a thing or two to say about the matters

"Muggle Dentists use *drills*?" Madame Pomfrey asked, incredulously. "Well, I never! That's absolutely barbaric."

She pulled out a handsaw. "Now, open wide."

"You know, I think you two go out of your way to pick fights with each other," said Hermione.

"That's ridiculous, Hermione," Harry said. "I'm not fighting Malfoy."

"Right..." Hermione had said, and pursed her lips with concern, and Harry nodded. She opened her mouth to start something – a confrontation, or a lecture perhaps – but then Ron came in complaining about how his homework wasn't nearly done and it was due tomorrow, and Harry congratulated himself on his well-learned evasive tactics.

The fading bruises did not come from nowhere but Anger was a very natural part of the grief process and so she did not pursue the issue.

They began to initiate the fights on the way to the hospital wing, simply for convenience's sake.

Sitting together in the Infirmary, Madame Pomfrey shook her head at them both, trying to look clearly disappointed but failing miserably. She looked a bit too pleased, instead.

One time, Malfoy actually vomited on the way to the Infirmary, his face pale and sickly green in the moments just before it happened. That had been particularly bad. Harry hadn't known what to do.

He cast Scourgify on the mess, bits of lunch and dinner combined – he thought he could see cranberry sauce and a bit of pie. With a trembling hand Malfoy pushed stray strands of hair back, out of his face, which was flushed red from the exertion. Harry didn't know how someone could look flushed and pale at the same time, but he did. The flush wasn't attractive – it made his skin splotchy with red, as if with disease or a bad rash. Malfoy stumbled a bit when he stood up again. He wavered on his feet. Instinctively, Harry went to help him, to catch him if he fell, and that thin, cruel mouth twisted into an ugly sneer and with surprising strength Malfoy pushed him away.

"Save your pity for someone who needs it, Potter," he spat, even with the spittle of vomit still on him.

It was a talent, truly, to make someone want to hurt you, even in your most hurt and vulnerable state. It wasn't exactly marketable, sure, but Malfoy would probably find some way around it – he was sneaky like that.

The whole thing made Harry uneasy. He wanted to hurt him and yet he didn't. His body had grown accustomed to the aching and the pain; he rarely even had nightmares anymore.

The next time he met up with Malfoy, he meant to tell him. But then Malfoy started hitting him, hitting him and hitting him and then Harry hit back and they went into it all over again.

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-"Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul..."-

Harry wonders if being at 12 Grimmauld Place will jar Draco's memory – it is like the kind of old house that he might be used to, after all, especially since Kreacher now works to keep it clean. The portraits surely wouldn't scream "blood traitor," not with a Malfoy in the house. No, Malfoy blood stayed pure until the very end, even when it ran bright and red.

Of course, before he moved back in, after the war, he had ordered Kreacher to take almost all evidence of the Blacks (save Sirius's room, of course) and hide it, and the same went for all the war-things; had insisted that he would go mad if he returned and found the house the way it was when it had been their headquarters. He figured that Kreacher would only be too happy to hoard all those wonderful possessions – set himself up in a little house-elf nest or something. He had come home to find his orders taken literally – all of the furniture under sheets, disguised as something else. Harry imagined that he was living in a house full of pack animals on Halloween, all of them with the same costume – horses and donkeys and camels and elephants as sheet-ghosts, with two eyeholes cut out.

He lived with the animal-ghosts for a while, before he found that he missed the familiarity of maps and priceless antiques. The sheets came off and for a while he was comfortable
but woke up every morning expecting to do battle. He considered an Extreme Makeover: 12 Grimmauld Place Edition. He came to a compromise – for fear of house elf spit and worse than spit in his food – and compromised by buying stuff. Stylish chairs and simple, sleek sets of furniture from Muggle Swiss furniture stores. Chests of drawers that wouldn't snap off his fingers if he forget to stroke them right. Flowery pillow shams and little embroidered cushions for the red velvet couches. Tea cosies hand-knit by grandmas, complete with Comforting Grandma Smell. Ceramic animal salt and pepper shakers in the shape of lions. Stuff.

A sign that read "Home Sweet Home" was probably too much, but "Warbase Sweet Warbase" had a certain ring to it, and that was allowed to stay.

When they step into the door, everything at 12 Grimmauld Place seems to welcome them; even the snakes on the carved into the wood panelling here and there seem to smile, which is actually...disturbing.

Like little worms with happy-faces, or something.

"Home...?" Draco asks, his smooth voice wavering now, as if with the uncertainty of youth.

"Yes, Draco, home," Harry says.

For a moment Harry can see Real Draco and what he would see – how horribly mismatched everything was, the way the checkered upholstery clashed with the flowered curtains clashed with the striped tablecloth. Harry can see the look of disdain he'd give, if not the look of absolute horror – stricken, at first, and then that wrinkling of his nose, as if he were smelling something rotten or faecal or both. He can hear his voice, sneering, *Good God, Potter, you actually live here? What is this? A museum of horrors? I can't look. I feel sick.* Harry wants Draco to like it, though, he wants him to appreciate his things and be happy with him.

Is this an experiment, perhaps? A tribute to bad taste? You really hate me, don't you.

"'S nice," says Draco happily, "home."

Harry can't help the smile that spreads across his face.

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-"...It is the tie that binds, and binds, and binds."-

Then came the day when he heard that Malfoy had gotten into a fight with Seamus and Ron. Something about it made Harry's gut twist and writhe – cut him open, and his intestines would likely resemble a tank full of eels. It wasn't that Malfoy didn't deserve it, knowing him, he probably did – a well-placed insult about Ron's family, perhaps, or maybe a bigoted death threat, Harry didn't know. Blood traitor and Half-blood and Mudblood, it was all too easy. Didn't even have to be about them. And it wasn't that he wasn't beaten up very badly – from what Ron had bragged about in great, breathless detail, he must have resembled a jelly doughnut, with all the jelly beaten out.
Harry cornered Malfoy, demanding to know the meaning of this. Well, it was more that he pushed him into a wall, not a corner, but the idea was pretty much the same idea.

"Get into a fight with Seamus and Ron, did you?"

"What?" Malfoy spat, shoving him back. "Here to defend your precious Weasel's honour? They won, you know, but then again, with two against one, I feel the scales were tipped just the slightest bit in their favour."

"You're not...you're not...oh, bugger this." Harry growled with frustration; that wasn't the point and Malfoy clearly didn't get it. "Who told you to fight them?"

"I think they perhaps invited it when they said, 'fight us, Malfoy,' or perhaps it was when one of them tried to hold me while the other swung and took a punch."

"You shouldn't have been fighting them! You want to fight someone, fight me! Keep your paws off everybody else!"

"What?" Malfoy spluttered, going even paler with rage. "You don't own me! You have no right to tell me who I can and can't fight! I'll fight whoever I want!"

Harry punched him, aiming for his jaw. It clipped the side of his head instead, but it was effective enough, in its own right.

Malfoy let out a howl and tackled him. He swung at him with an insane sort of passion, fist connecting solidly with Harry's face, and did he make up his own little war cry? It could have been, that would

have been just like that stupid, crazy Malfoy, because he was insane and they should really call him mad Malfoy. Or, it could have just been the sound of Harry's ears ringing.

Ow.

Either way, either way, later, they were both back at the Infirmary, Harry squinting at the glare of all that sunlight on all that white. His nose was swollen and broken and was likely to swell to the size, shape, and colour of an eggplant because Madame Pomfrey hadn't gotten to them yet – the wounded Hufflepuff Quidditch players had priority, simply because they were just a little less suicidal.

"That's *favouritism*," Malfoy insisted. "Unjust *discrimination*." One eye was swollen shut and half of his face looked as if it had been stung by bees.

As Harry was holding an ice pack to his bruised nose, everything throbbing with pain, he decided that he felt a little better.

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-"Misery no longer loves company. Nowadays it insists on it."-

The key to feeling better is to better yourself.

At least, according to one of the many books Harry has on Getting Over the War.

There are shelves upon shelves of literature at home, blue and brown and red binding with their titles embossed in gold, shining helpfully out at him. One of them even tries to lend a hand – literally – every time you pick it up: "The Helpful Book of Helping (Yourself)." The disembodied hand emerges from the pages and follows you around, trying to help out with household chores. Kreacher resents it.

This is because Hermione's answer to everything is books. There wasn't a lot of post-war literature at first, but to counter that, there were the post-war support groups. There were the veteran organisations that Hermione advocated, insisted upon even. Every week there was a new, colourful flier that she waved in Harry's face, like some sort of giant disoriented butterfly.

"Harry," she'd say, "I really think you ought to give this one a chance. It's a big part of the healing process; it could be a good opportunity for you."

As a show of good faith, she promised that she would attend the support group as well. To show even better faith, she forced Ron to go, too.

"Why do I have to go?" Ron had whined. "I'm not the one who's fucked-up, here!...Er, no offence, mate."

"None taken," Harry said.

Hermione had hit him. "It's very important that we show our support for Harry!" she had chided. "Find a Support System," she had quoted. Harry could hear the capitals. "Let your loved ones support you, help you, and love you. Now is the time to be supported, helped, and loved. Would it kill you to be a little more sensitive?"

Ron rubbed his arm where he had been smacked. "I *am* sensitive, especially there! That's my war wound you're hitting! Where's *my* support, help, and love?"

"Love hurts," Harry had said, sagely.

This had been in the days before Rose was born, and the two of them plus Harry had still all had a life together. After Rose, their nights out were replaced by nights in, bottle feedings and early bedtimes. They urged Harry to continue his wild bachelor lifestyle (which had included such wild escapades as attending support group meetings) but Harry had just smiled and shaken his head. Instead he spent his Friday nights playing with Rose or helping Ron fix his DVD player (broken, again, because Ron had placed something in it that didn't belong –"What? Pancakes and DVDs are a similar shape!") and every now and then one of them asked about Ginny.

At the support group meeting, Hermione had nodded along to everything the group leader said, while Ron drank cup after cup of free coffee, his small plastic plate piled high with slightly stale, free baked goods.

Harry doodled on in the margins of his worksheet. It read, "Bee positive!" and showed a small picture of a bee with a slightly disturbing manic grinning face. It had crazy eyes – that's what Draco would have called them – its eyes were full of The Crazy.

Harry drew a Crazy Home for it, and then he decided that it must be lonely, so he drew it some Crazy Bee Friends. It was a honeybee, probably, so it must produce honey, even if it was Crazy, and so he etched in some honey dripping from a hive. But this would surely attract a bear, which was evil (with glowing red eyes, those hateful red eyes), and then the bees were Fucked, since the bear was so powerful, and he had to come up with a military strategy for them, they had to get organised--

"Are you paying attention, Harry?" Hermione asked. "This is important."

Right. Important. He had to pay attention to the matter at hand.

Constant vigilance, as he was once taught, before that teacher had died as well.

Paying attention had rarely changed anything in Harry's life. Paying attention wouldn't bring anybody back from the dead.

There was George, only half a person without his other half. Angelina Johnson, he heard, had lost an arm. Lavender Brown was burned and scarred, her pretty face ruined forever. And they were the "lucky"

ones, supposedly, since they were still among the living.

Paying attention to some bloke in checked robes telling them that "every day is a new day" probably wouldn't be much to help them.

To Harry the idea of the meetings seemed more sad than anything else. Then again, he supposed that organisations and meetings and gatherings helped some people, like Dumbledore's Army had once made Luna Lovegood feel as if she had friends.

There were War Survivors support groups. There were War Veteran Support Groups. There were support groups for the Families of War Victims, the Friends of Families of War Victims, the Pets of the Friends of Families of War Victims.

There were probably even Ex-Deatheater support groups. Harry could see it. They'd have a 12-step programme.

Step One: Admit that you had a problem; you were powerless against the urge to be evil.

Step Two: Seek help from a greater power to overcome the urge to be evil.

Step Three: Make a decision to turn lives and will over to the Ministry, Step Four: Make an inventory of all the ways you were evil, etc.

And then one Amycus Carrow had approached him, his hair slicked back, looking particularly clean and polished.

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter?" he had said. "I'm on step nine of my programme, and I must make amends to everyone I've wronged. Except when to do so would injure them or others."
Of course, Harry couldn't think of anything that he could have him do to make amends to him, and Amycus Carrow followed him around all day, swearing that he was in his debt as punishment for his wrongs. Finally Harry gave him a grocery list and made him run back and forth to the store at least ten times. By the end of it all, he had 16 gallons of milk, 14 dozen eggs, 8 pounds of flour, 6 pounds of butter, and 7 jars of jam, 9 pounds of meat, three Christmas hams, and one salted herring.

He hoped that it had made him feel useful. Harry has enough trouble trying to think up ways to make himself feel useful, never mind someone else.

It makes sense that Hermione is also a big advocate of Groups. She always has been – it used to be SPEW, and then there was the DA. Now there was "Soldiers United and Carefully Keeping Sane."

Walking into a group, the room cheery and light, the decor pleasant and bland, the smell of pastries and cheap free coffee in the air, looking at a circle of sad, traumatised faces; Harry couldn't help thinking of the same way that they had looked so hopefully out at him during the war.

Of course, during the war, there had been less coffee and free pastries.

It's really a matter of the naked leading the blind, here. In some cases, it's the blind leading the blind. Or, more accurately, the blind leading the scarred and amputated. Well, except for the leg amputees. They're not going anywhere, unless they've got wheels.

It was supposed to be therapeutic, healing, sharing his experiences with a bunch of strangers (and some of them not-so strangers, and some of them just strange). Some of them have lost friends, some of them lovers, others have lost family. They've lost limbs and bones and bits of flesh and skin.

None of them, however, have ever faced the Dark Lord (and lived to tell the tale) and when it was his turn to speak the room went silent, their eyes watching him, marvelling at the legend made flesh. His hurts couldn't possibly mirror their own, and surely both blood and pain ran different in Saviour veins.

"What was it like, facing You-Know-Who?"

"Were you scared...no, of course you weren't."

"I hear you rode in on a dragon and defeated him with a single Expelliarmus, is that true?"

"Okay, okay, so when the papers asked you, 'Harry Potter, you just defeated the Dark Lord, now what are you going to do,' did you really go to Disneyworld?"

He was their Hero, brave and unafraid, his very design immune to suffering. What was he doing here?

"I have to go to the washroom," Ron whispered to Hermione, loudly. "It's all that damn coffee."

The name of this group was Living One Second at a Time.

Another one that Hermione wanted him to possibly attend is DRUGD: Daring Resistance Under Growing Depression.

Soldiers Healing Internally with Time, Harry thinks.

An anger-management group could also prove useful, Hermione said: Functional Usage of Controlled Temper.

Embrace Life! They said.

There Can Be Life After Devastation! They said.

Choose Life! They said.

Heal Yourself! They said.

"Mr. Potter, may I please see you after session?" the Group Leader asked.

Harry had expected questions. Maybe a harrowing account of lying in the trenches, seeing the bodies mired in mud, eyes wide open and gazing at an uncaring sky.

"I'm so pleased you came to my group today," the Leader said, taking his hand and pumping it up and down, as if he expected Holy Water to start spurting out of Harry's mouth if he did it for long enough and hard enough. "I can't tell you what an honour, what an absolute honour it is. It means a lot to the rest of the group that you're here, you know, and I really hope you grace us with your wonderful presence again. Oh, and, by the way...can I get your autograph?"

Harry had refused to go back, when Hermione asked him about it, later. Ron had refused to go back without Harry – because he was perfectly normal and well-adjusted, he insisted; well, that and the coffee had given him the shakes and kept him up all night. He had had strange dreams when he finally did get to sleep, something about birds and bees in a basket.

Hermione had been forced to give up, but that didn't stop her from giving Harry the best helpful literature that she could find.

When she first found out about Draco it had first been a shock; she had been stopping by to drop off a cake that Ron had baked.

(Hermione had been a horrible cook, they discovered, but Ron had been forced to pick up a thing or two from his mother, and while he had been adverse to the idea at first, he soon decided that wearing her pink apron was an even trade-off for ingesting something edible every night.) Rose in one arm and the cake in the other, she had let out a little cry and dropped the cake on the floor when she saw Draco hiding behind Harry, clinging to his arm.

It could have been worse, Harry supposed. She could have dropped the baby.

The next week she was back, with a pie and an armload of books.

"Magical Maladies, A-Z" by Melody Malady. "Spell-Damage Does Not Always Spell Damage" by Miss Destruction Dupree, Mediwitch. "Living with Drain Bamage" by Lockeroy Gilderhart. "How to Deal When Your Ex-lover That You're Still Hung Up On Has Irreversible Brain Damage for Dummies."

"The Complete Idiot's Guide to Taking Care of a Five Year Old in a Grown Wizard's Body."

"Little Boys, Big Wizards...wait, this isn't a self-help book. Hermione!"

Hermione had blushed and immediately snatched the book back. "Erm, sorry, that one's not for you."

Harry had stared at her; not even facing the Dark Lord had ever unsettled him like this.

"Erm, it's not mine. I mean, it's not for me, it's for a friend," she kept blushing and tucked the book away.

"Don't tell Ron," she said.

"I won't," Harry promised, faintly.

Where the hell she found those books, Harry would never know, but she was Hermione Granger, Mistress of the Written Word. She was as sharp as a whip, and with a single flick, the books came crashing to their knees in obedience, eager to fulfil her bidding.

Something like that.

There is a way to beat this, there is always a way to beat this. Even if he actually doesn't know what to do with Draco, now that he's got him

home. He opens up a book, searching for guidance. He reads aloud, "You can't put a Band-Aid on every boo-boo you've made; some just need time to heal..."

Draco cocks his head to the side, clearly confused. "B-band-aid?" he echoes. "B-boo-boo? Wh-who's got...got a boo-boo? Wha-whassa band-aid?"

Harry tosses the book to the side. It lands with a soft thud on the carpeted floor.

"What do you want for dinner?" he asks Draco, pushing a strand of pale pale hair back from his pale face. "I'll get Kreacher to make it for us."

Help, support, love, even if it hurts.

Take Life One Step at a Time, They said.

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-"Trust not yourself, but your defects to know. Make use of every friend and every foe."-

It wasn't too far into the semester that they got caught.

The fighting couldn't go on forever, of course. It was true that they didn't give Professors Snape and McGonagall enough credit, because somehow they found out just how often it was that Harry and Malfoy visited the Infirmary.

"You're both idiotic if you ever thought that this could escape notice for long," Snape sneered. "Draco, I am particularly disappointed in you. This sort of recklessness and stupidity I would have expected from Potter, but from you?"

"It was self-defence, Professor," Malfoy said, always eager to sell him out. "Potter is a madman; dangerous, even. I never would have sought him out on my own!"

Harry spluttered.

"Ah," Snape said, with sudden understanding, "Aggression problems, Potter? Bullying your fellow students? I should have expected as much, considering your father. Like father, like son, I suppose. Perhaps you could benefit from counselling, I'm sure we could work it into your detention..."

"Shame on both of you," Professor McGonagall interjected, before Harry could attack Snape for attacking his father. Aggression problems? Ha! Not bloody likely.

"Severus, you know as well as I do, that considering the history between these two that it takes two to tango."

Malfoy made a face. Even Harry had to agree it was a poor turn of phrase, and then he was upset with himself for daring to agree with Malfoy.

McGonagall gave them both a steely look over her glasses. "So to speak."

"True," Snape conceded the point, much to Harry's surprise. "Malfoy, fifty points for fighting on school grounds. Potter, one hundred points for fighting and for tempting Malfoy."

Well, at least that wasn't a surprise.

McGonagall bristled a little, her face stern. "Fifty points from Malfoy for exciting Potter."

Malfoy made a small sound of outrage.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Fifty points from Potter and one week's detention for fighting when already given a warning."

"Fifty points from Malfoy and two weeks' detention for fighting when given a warning and setting a poor example as a Prefect," McGonagall countered.

"I can't believe they're having a pissing contest over us," Harry muttered surreptitiously to Malfoy, the only person available that he could complain to about the immaturity of adults.

"At this point we'll be in detention until graduation," Malfoy muttered back, as the two professors continued to argue and mete out their unjust punishments. "I hate you, Potter. This is all your fault."

"*My* fault? You started it!" Harry hissed.

"Well, maybe if you didn't have such a stupid ugly scarry dumb face...ow! Professor, Potter hit me!"

Snape whirled around, robes swirling with dramatic flair. "Another fifty points, Potter. You saw that one, Minerva."

"Tattletale," Harry muttered.

"Malfoy most likely incited him," Professor McGonagall said. Harry had always liked Professor McGonagall. She was tough, but fair.

And then she and Snape began to argue all over again.

It was then that Madam Pomfrey made an appearance, summoned by the sound of the 'Ow.' 'Ow's probably rang out for her like the tone of a golden bell (and for whom does the bell toll?). She had come to love them in her own sick way over the past couple of weeks, Harry supposed, since they always came to her so bruised and bleeding and broken.
She also must have been, predictably, reluctant to let them go. She had been using them as her personal guinea pigs for her twisted, sadistic Experiments.

Malfoy's words, of course.

"You're actually more a ferret, if you were a furry little animal," Harry had reminded him at that point. Malfoy responded to this by biting him, the little ferret. "Ah! You took off a piece of skin, you fucker! What the hell is wrong with you?" Madame Pomfrey came over with her new salve for bite wounds that result in missing skin, and it seemed to sting as much as it healed.

Harry had been suddenly, ominously, reminded of Fred and George and their experiments on the first-years. He could see Madam Pomfrey as a Hogwarts student, chasing younger students around and squealing, "Let me Heal you!!"

And now their torturer was their saviour, in an ironic twist of Fate – as most twists of Fate tended to be.

"Surely their pain is punishment enough," Madam Pomfrey said. She was an angel of mercy, truly. "What is most important here, after all, is not rules but their health. Boys will be boys, you know."

It was a sane enough sentiment to bring the two professors back to their senses.

"Right, right. But if you send each other to the Infirmary one more time this year," Professor McGonagall threatened, "I'll see to it that you're both suspended from the Quidditch team indefinitely."

"And rest assured," Snape added, always eager to have the last word, "you'll be serving detention for me."

They couldn't do this ever again.

It was Officially Over.

It had become second nature by now, however, to want to fight when he saw Malfoy next. To need to punch and be punched, to hit and be hit, to cause pain and to hurt and to feel and to have his pain pounded out of him.

Harry tried to hold it back. Only Malfoy knew exactly how to look at him, what to say and how to sneer in the right way, in just the perfect way to get his blood boiling.

It was as if Harry had given him a literal shiny, big red button, and told him not to push it.

A little fighting wouldn't hurt. Just a little punch, he promised himself, just a tiny one.

Malfoy stared at him. And stared at him, and stared at him. It was creepy, those clear grey eyes sharp and jagged and trying to pierce into him.

"What the hell do you want?" Harry snarled.

"As if I'd ever want anything to do with you," Malfoy sneered, lip curling. He paused for a moment, and then added, as if in afterthought, "I hate you and you smell like fermented vomit and everyone close to you dies. Parents, dog, et cetera."

It wasn't his best, but Harry wanted it too much to care. He punched him, hard, and then again and again and he felt a satisfying crunch as his fist smashed into that pale face.

"Fucker!" Malfoy cried, and then he was upon him, knocking them both to the floor. Harry struggled to push him off but then he felt the blows rain down on his face. "Fucker, fucker, fucker!" Malfoy cried with each punch. Bright pain exploded behind Harry's eyeballs as Malfoy lifted Harry up by his robes and slammed him into the floor, but instead of continuing as anticipated, the blonde made a noise of disgust and dropped Harry instead, leaving him momentarily stunned on the cold stone floor.

"By nose!" Malfoy said.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Harry said, when he finally pushed himself up. His tooth felt loose again.

"You broke by nose, you fucker!" Malfoy said, hand pressed against his face. Bright red blood began to trickle out from between his pale white fingers.

"Yeah, so?" Harry said, hand on his ringing head. "I've done way worse before."

"You idiot!" Malfoy said, shoving him hard with one hand, the other still cupping his nose. "Dis dime we can'd go indo the Infirmary and if I can'd cast Episkey righd it's going do heal *crooked*."

"Oh," said Harry, but he found it a bit hard to care, since he could taste blood again.

"Oh, god, dis was part of your evil plan all along, wasn'd id? You were so jealous you had do go and dry do bake be as ugly as you?" Malfoy cried, voice both nasal and high-pitched. He pulled his hand away from his face to look at it, saw the bright red and grey eyes went comically wide. "I hade you! I hade you so much! Fuck you, Harry Podder!"

This was bad. Not that he actually cared about the little wanker, but if Malfoy showed up to any of his classes looking the way he did, they were both certain to get punished.

"Look," Harry said. "Look, calm down, I'll heal you."

Malfoy laughed, a little hysterically, a weird burbling sound that seemed to bubble out of his hand along with the blood that was trickling out between his pale fingers. "Whad makes you think I should trusd *you*?"

"Well," Harry said, tongue tenderly probing inside his own rapidly bruising cheek, "mainly because I'm not *you*."

"You'd hex id off. Dun think I dun know you. I had such a cude nose, doo," Malfoy said, mournfully. "Goodbye, dashing good looks. Goodbye, beaudiful aesthedic symmedry. Goodbye, dreabs of living a life withoud hideous deforbity."

Harry touched his own face with gentle, probing fingers, testing out his wounds gingerly. Fuck, Malfoy had done a number on him in a relatively short amount of time. He felt bruised and swollen all over.

"Well, I need Healing, too," Harry said. "You're a bastard, you know that, right?"

"Okay," said Malfoy, "Clearly, there's only one way do handle this."

He paused for dramatic (drabatic) effect. Harry waited for the Brilliant Plan to be revealed.

"We stard with our backs do each other, we dake three paces each, and then we durn around and Heal." This was apparently, in his strange little Malfoy mind, what constituted a reasonable plan.

"Wait, what?" said Harry. "You mean like a Wizard's Duel?"

"Basically," Malfoy said.

With a sigh Harry agreed; backs to each other, he counted to three, turned around and cast *Episkey* and prayed that Malfoy wasn't going to cast The Cruciatus Curse.

Episkey, of course, is not a long-range spell. Predictably, they missed. Harry's spell hit the window behind Malfoy, while Malfoy's spell bounced, ineffectively, off the stone wall behind Harry.

"Oh, bugger this," Harry said. "This is ridiculous." He sighed. "We should just Heal each other, because we're both going to get in trouble if we don't."

Malfoy made a funny, strangled-burble noise. "I'b nod ledding you anywhere near by face! Even if I drusted you – which I dun – You'll probably bungle id up and fuse by nose do by ear."

"Fine," Harry said. "Be ugly and deformed for the rest of your life. See if I care."

Malfoy then made a variety of interesting noises, varying between muttering and growling and burbling. The blood continued to drip down his face. Finally, he said, "Fuck you, Harry Podder," which Harry took as a sign of agreement in Malfoy-speak.

"I'll even let you Heal me first," Harry said, rather generously, especially considering the way that the grey eyes lit up and became luminous with evil, evil thoughts. "But if you Hex me," he warned, "I'm not going to Heal you."

With a long-suffering sigh, Malfoy agreed, and then suddenly Harry had the business end of wand in his face.

Malfoy grinned, wickedly, even though that must have hurt his nose.

Harry held his breath.

"Hold sdill," Malfoy managed to drawl, even with his broken nose.

Harry kept holding his breath.

But then he felt the familiar warmth of the spell, the tingling of broken capillaries knitting back together, the swelling going down and bruises fading. He slowly exhaled.

And, contrary to all of Malfoy's whining, when he was done, the blonde's nose was back to its unbroken, (not) cute condition.

It was like that from then on.

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-"There are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire, the other is to gain it."-

On the first night in the house, Harry works on getting Draco settled in.

They sit down together to dinner. It's almost domestic. Harry looks at Draco over his beef stroganoff, over the noodles and gravy sitting pierced on his fork, and he thinks that yes, this could work.

Draco fumbles with his food. It's really no trouble at all to pick up his dropped fork and get a clean one, to sit down next to him and feed him, watching the catch of those perfect white teeth, still perfect even though everything else is a little frayed around the edges now.

He'll figure out how to tell everyone the news later.

After dinner, Harry prepares the bath. He wants to wash him clean of The Crazy; purify him of all the death-smells and the crazy-smells and the taint of HOSPITAL like an invisible red stamp upon his body. He helps Draco undress, first the jumper, sliding off of him easily, and it's different, when it's in his house and not the sterile, stale air of the hospital – and then suddenly he feels a twinge of something that flares hotly up in him at the sight of that familiar body. He's ashamed but he can't force himself to avert his eyes.

When was the last time that he's felt something hot like this? Not since the last time, surely, that last time so long ago, something that he wouldn't let himself remember and that he couldn't let himself forget.

His eyes roam over the smooth, pale body, sweeping down and then back up again and then they come to a rest on the pillow of his soft, slightly chapped lips.

He wants to...He could kiss him, a little. Just a little bit, not a lot, maybe a soft, shy press of lips against his own even though he had never kissed Draco just a little back in school. But it would feel good, even for that little bit, to have another warm body against him, to feel the beat of another heart. He can probably manage it, can't he, just a little kiss? He has never done anything "just a little bit" in his life, but he feels like he could try.

It doesn't occur to him until the water is running that this is possibly the first of many bad ideas.

Draco stands before him, his sweater tugged off, his blonde hair mussed because of the action, from the static of the wool and where it had gotten stuck, for a moment, over his head. It makes Harry think of a dandelion, a little, and he would smile if it weren't so upsetting that Draco wasn't fussing over it much. Steam begins to gather on the bathroom mirror. His skin is smooth and pale all over.

His body is perfect, just as he remembered it. Maybe a little thinner now, maybe a little more scarred, now, and the Dark Mark is prominent, sharp and black on that white skin, almost like an inking in a textbook. The important things, however - The curve of his shoulders is the same, the line of his jaw, the subtle curve of his spine and the muscles underneath all that soft skin. Then again, his eyes...

His eyes are wide and guileless and trusting, and filled with pure love, almost, and it almost makes Harry laugh. His eyes are all wrong. And it almost makes Harry choke.
With trembling hands he undoes his jeans and this time he does look away, not wanting to face that area of desire.

He urges him into the bath, and he has to carefully point out that the bath is too small when he's asked to join in. It's not all that small, but it's better than the alternative. The alternative is just as dangerous as plugging in a curling iron near the bath, not that that had ever endangered Aunt Petunia, not that Harry had ever tried.

Draco splashes about a bit. Harry doesn't even think to admonish him, gulping and picking up a washcloth instead, running the softened fibres over the skin. He can feel the heat rise from the water and from his body, just lightly tickling his fingers. He lets his fingers skim a collarbone, and it feels both like something he's always known and like a discovery, the pale skin stretched canvas-tight over the bone.

"Have to wash your neck," he manages, and Draco only smiles and nods.

Squeezing the washcloth, he watches the water trickle down in clear rivulets down all the pale skin. He scrubs him lightly, down the flat planes of his chest, feeling the outline of his ribs. When he breathes in it is like the skin sticking in. His wrists are graceful but strangely small.

Harry frowns and tries to remember Draco's favourite food, if he ever knew it. He liked to eat a lot of sweets, that he knew, all those care packages from his mum. There is so much for them to find out

together, and well, there is the time to do it, now.

Now he can touch him all over, and where Draco once resisted it now he welcomes it. *I know I'm gorgeous and irresistible*, he might have said, *but do you have to do that? It's annoying. It feels like – ugh – things crawling all over me. Stop it with your insect-fingers!* This Draco would only laugh lightly if it tickled, giggle, almost, disturbingly, but Harry can overlook that for the way he presses back into the touch. This Draco would not have accused him of having insect-fingers, nor would be ever tell Harry to stop touching him.

Of course, that Draco was also the type to whine and complain and then push Harry up against the wall, whereas this one doesn't even remember how to do it, but Harry supposes that some compromises can be made.

He has a raging erection when he goes to bed and pressing it against Draco seems to make it worse, although the blonde gives no indication that he feels it. After he's sure that Draco's asleep, so sweet and trusting beside him, he goes into the bathroom and wanks. Two, three times and it's still not enough, and his trembling hands make him miss the wastebasket when he tries to toss the wadded-up tissues in, and everything feels too unsure for him to try and pick things up. He goes one more time and it takes him forever to come, and when he does it's only a thin, pathetic dribbling of semen, but with his dick rubbed raw and tired he can finally climb back into bed and go to sleep.

It's not the only bed in the entire house, of course, but the rest haven't been used in years. Not since this place was a safehouse during the war. Harry never thought that he'd have need for those beds again – too many memories of mud and blood-stained sheets for there to be good dreams inside of them. It only makes sense for Draco to sleep with him, the two of them together.

He is here and he is real and he is compliant and happy, and he smells of Harry's shampoo and soap, and none of these things Harry had ever thought he'd have- not in this lifetime, at least.

He means to have them on the opposite sides of the bed, but Draco is a snuggler, apparently, although he had never liked it back at school. He had only tolerated it, just, Harry had always thought, when he used to burrow into him, face against the crook of his neck.

Draco feels good underneath his hands, the way his body used to yield to his punches.

They lay down together and he spoons him, Draco folded into his arms, folded into him and against him and like always, he can't have him. Silky blonde hair tickles his face, his nose, his cheek. Everything seems to burn and tingle wherever they touch.

His erection, somehow renewed, despite how he was sure that he'd spent himself, presses into the heat of that body, seeking it out and although Harry can feel it, he forces himself not to move.

Sleeping with him is torture. Worse than that, this isn't something that tires the body, this is pain that sucks away at the soul. He could probably count on one hand all the times that they had actually slept together, and now he has the rest of his life for that. He wishes it didn't sound so ominous in his head.

He could abuse him, and he would take it. He could hit him, and he would take it. He could pull his hair, smash his face, and he would take it, take it even as Harry watched his skin bruise and his lips split. He could give him anything and Malfoy would take it, Draco would take it. Harry could make him take it.

Harry could even make him like it.

Draco in his arms is warm and pliant. He is too much, too hot, and still not enough, not what Harry wants or needs.

His eyes closed, nestled in so tightly, breathing in the smell of Draco's skin, he skims his hand, gently, over the top of a thigh, tracing small shapes on the bony jut of a hip, imagines sliding his hand in and down, as his fingers brush skin, over and over...

"H-Harry," Draco says, "tickles."

Harry snatches his hand back as sharply as if someone's stuck him with a branding iron, like Petunia had once threatened him with her curling iron, his face and ears and everything burning.

He keeps himself absolutely, resolutely still for the rest of the night.

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-"Common sufferings are far stronger than common joys."-

Snape was a mastermind, Malfoy claimed, a particularly evil genius.

For once, Harry was inclined to agree.

Between him and McGonagall, they looked to be serving detention for a long, long time.

They were given a List of Tasks:

1. Harvest gnat wings.
2. Crush beetles.
3. De-crust ingredients jars.
4. Re-organise Supply Closet
5. Clean out Supply Closet
6. Scrub out cauldrons
7. Spool spider silk
8. Grind Bull Horn into powder
9. Alphabetise Potions recipes
10. Detangle the Mermaid Hair
11. Polish the Newt Eyes
12. Disassemble Frogs and Chickens

"It's the Twelve Labours of Hercules," Malfoy whined, one sleeve pushed up to his elbow, the other pushed up only half-heartedly. "Only they're not impossible, just Impossibly Annoying."

Harry had to agree with this as well.

"You're the Gryffindor," he informed Harry, "therefore you can wear the lion skin and head."

"You have issues," Harry told him. "Seriously, Malfoy, get help. For your own sake."

While they toiled and sweated and became covered with various types of gunk, Snape casually observed them, every now and then glancing up with eyes that were hawk-like and beady, as he sat at his desk and graded scrolls upon scrolls of student essays.

They couldn't even fight to make it interesting.

Which actually became interesting in its own right, as Harry tried to see what he could get away with sticking into Malfoy's hair without his notice, imagining the horrified reactions later. The slight smudge of slug slime clumping together the fine blonde strands almost made it all worth it.

"What are you sniggering about over there, Potter? Merlin, you've lost it, haven't you? The potion fumes have destroyed what little brain you had."

Scrubbing cauldrons, their elbows bumped. Malfoy's were particularly sharp and pointy, as Harry knew, from the multiple times he had experienced them jabbed into his stomach or side.

"Watch it, you stupid oaf!" Malfoy hissed, which of course only made Harry try to knock into him more.

Malfoy got back at him for this when they were in the Supply Closet, and he kept inching in closer and closer until Harry was against the dusty wall, skin and robes becoming covered in grime. Harry was tempted to pour the entire jar of Newt Eyes on him, if not for the fact that that meant that they'd have to clean it later. Malfoy did not care as much, and spent time try to bounce Newt Eyes off of Harry's head (they were really very bouncy, like those Super Bouncy Balls Dudley had liked for a week when they were 8).

And of course, as soon as one task was finished, another was added to The List.

"I hate the List," Malfoy declared, passionately, as he closed his hand around a leaky ingredient jar and pulled it away to find slime on his fingers. "Ugh...gross...I hate it as much as Granger apparently hates hair products and Weasleys hate chastity. I hate it almost as much as I hate you."

For as much as he hated him, however, even Malfoy should admit that his nose was looking rather good these days.

Neither of them were allowed to attend Quidditch practise, of course, but Malfoy predictably weaselled out of detention on those days, promising Professor Snape that he would make them up in a far-off future that would never happen. Harry didn't even bother to ask, not wanting to see the expression of nasty glee on Snape's face as he turned him down, time after time.

It was surprising, then, when Malfoy miraculously talked Snape into

granting him the right to attend just one practise.

"Don't say I never did anything for you," Malfoy said.

"Yeah, wow, thanks," Harry had said, genuinely grateful. He wondered what could have possibly inspired this offering of good will.

"And in turn, you can do all my disgusting goopy tasks for the next four days," the blonde continued. "Look, I've saved all these great nasty, gunky cauldrons for you."

Oh, right, something like that would do it.

"Kind of you," Harry said, drily.

"See, you've got me wrong all along," Malfoy said, soulfully, his clean hand placed over his heart. "You've judged me rather unfairly. I'm not the enemy here. I'm really just a friend who's trying to kill you."

Some days he wanted to punch Malfoy more than others. Some days his knuckles tingled with the urge to connect with something, or tingled with the flesh memory of scrapes from the night before. Other times he was amazed at how long he had spent in his company without even thinking of beating him up.

When he wanted it, he went looking for it – having a Marauder's map was particularly handy.

Malfoy sent him bossy, businesslike Owls, with just a location and a time scrawled upon them.

"Quidditch pitch at midnight. "

"Second floor Prefect's bathroom. Quarter to ten."

"Outside front gate, 1 am."

Every time Harry wondered whether it would be like first year, another attempted setup, because Malfoy couldn't have possibly been satisfied with all the opportunities to set him up this year that he didn't take advantage of. Every time, however, Malfoy was there on time and waiting when he showed up.

Malfoy had had the chance to hurt him – seriously, in his weakened state – and he hadn't. He had Healed him, instead, and he had even bothered to do a rather decent job of it. All day Harry wondered many things, the hows and whys of it, mostly the whys, but then he decided

that Malfoy needed this just as much as he needed this.

Not like he could get it from anyone else, after all.

From then on he snuck around to fight Malfoy. If Hermione asked, he told her he was going to the library – always guaranteed to garner a favourable response, enough that sometimes he thought she didn't mind being lied to. He was researching a Dark Thing but it was Nothing to Worry About, and if that didn't throw her off track, he was spending his time investigating Malfoy, whom he was sure was a Death Eater. If Ron asked, he was going to practise Quidditch on his own, or that he was going down to the Lake, or that he was going somewhere to think. Ron was relieved, seeing as how the mere mention of any emotion terrified him, and he hadn't been able to take Harry's upset over Sirius very well at all. It didn't matter where Harry was getting help with his issues from, as long as he was getting help, after all.

Sitting together afterwards, things were usually exceedingly awkward. Every time that hawthorn wand was pointed at his face, Harry held his breath, his life and well-being in the hands of someone he didn't even like.

The tip of a wand stroked over his face as Malfoy's fingers cupped his cheek, holding him still, and he never was Hexed or Cursed.

Trust was a tricky thing. He looked into grey eyes when he returned the favour, watching purpling bruises heal into flawless pale skin, like a flower blossoming in reverse. Malfoy glared at him, defiant, and if he was afraid, Harry could never tell.

Then again, Harry wasn't a treacherous snake like Malfoy, and so it made sense that he had considerably less to fear.

"All done?" Malfoy usually drawled, when the last visible bruise was magicked away.

"Yeah," Harry would say, and often he wondered about all the bruises and hurts that he couldn't see. Sometimes he kept those bruises, too, mainly because they were in embarrassing places, sometimes because he needed it as evidence of what had happened.

"Yeah, well. Okay." And then Malfoy would get up and go back to the Slytherin dungeons. If he were feeling particularly amiable, he might say something like, "Bye." If particularly juvenile, he'd say, "Smell you later, Potty."

It was stupid, really, to think that he would say thanks. For anything at all.

Harry wondered why he would even want to hear it.

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-"There's a lot to be said for self-delusionment when it comes to matters of the heart."-

In the morning, when Harry wakes up, Draco is staring in fascination at the radio, which has turned itself on again to wake Harry up for the job that he's not going to today. Harry stares at fascination at Draco, the reality of him in his bed, the weight and warmth of the blonde against him.

"Talking to the songbird yesterday/flew me to a past not far away/she's a little pirate in my mind..."

"Oh," says Harry. "Do you like that?" He reaches over and turns up the radio. He touches Draco, just to make sure that he's here and real and not one of those traitorous dreams that have you convinced they are real and actually not.

Real Draco, he thinks, would have loved Muggle radio, and pretended to hate it. This Draco has no reason to pretend; he is more honest, in a way. Harry can appreciate honesty, and when he slides his arms around a slim waist Draco doesn't pull away.

The song finishes. The next song starts.

"You better lose yourself in the music, the moment
You want it, you better never let it go
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime yo—"

Draco, much to Harry's amusement, seems to like Eminem.

This is followed by a song called "The Bitter End."

"Every step we take that's synchronized
Every broken bone
Reminds me of the second time
That I followed you home

You shower me with lullabies
As you're walking away
Reminds me that its killing time—"

Harry reaches over and turns the radio off. Draco makes a noise of

disappointment.

"We'll listen to more radio, later," Harry promises.

The reality of Draco in his house is jarring; it's something he's toyed with and imagined but hasn't really started thinking of seriously until the past few months. Not since his last breakup with Ginny. For the past several years, they have consistently broken up and gotten back together again. He has a feeling that this breakup is the final one, this time.
Draco smells like his soaps and shampoo and closes one eye when Harry strokes his hand down his face; features familiar but expression foreign. His thumb brushes his lips and then Draco is smiling and mirroring the gesture, imitating him as if it were some sort of game.

With a vague feeling of nausea, Harry pulls away and suggests breakfast, which Draco agrees to, happily. Already he's doing better with him than he was at the hospital.

Harry knows he's made the right decision. The only thing is to try his best not to give in and touch Draco, at least not in that way.

Draco and Kreacher get along. Draco's used to house elves – he must have remembered that much, at least, from his childhood, and Kreacher's used to Purebloods from the House of Black, and insane ones at that. Kreacher's used to crazy people in general, come to think of it.

Draco accidentally-on-purposes knocks things over and Kreacher scrambles to clean up after him. He spills whatever liquid he can find. He tries to get Kreacher to punish himself with an iron.

Harry's never seen Kreacher so happy.

Draco likes both music and being read to, and he's only too happy to provide both. Harry Owls Hermione to forget the self-help books, if she sends anymore he'll burn them and record their screams to play back to her, but could she please send some Wizarding children's literature, he's trying to reconstruct something, here.

"Oh," Hermione had said, when he had mentioned the idea of taking Draco in, once, casually, just throwing it out there, like casting bread on water - for uninterested fat ducks.
They had been out at a cafe together, Hermione's choice, and he had taken a large bite of his sandwich directly after the words had left his mouth. "It's not that...not that I don't think it's a good idea, I mean...I

understand that you have good intentions behind it, Harry, but...do you really think that's the best thing for you right now?"

She had looked so caring, so concerned.

Harry, his mouth full, had chewed angrily –as best as one can, without requiring immediate application of the Heimlich Manoeuvre. "I could make it work," Harry had snapped back, almost immediately, and then not knowing why he had snapped, he added a mumbled, "it was just an idea, anyway."

Hermione's expression softened. She reached out and squeezed his hand. "I know. I know. You're a good person, Harry.

Harry had smiled back.

That was what was important, wasn't it? He was a good person. It was – is- a good thing to do.

He hadn't asked Ron his opinion at all. After all, if Hermione approved, then surely Ron would, too, or she would eventually talk him around. And even if not, after all – what was the use of asking a question that you already knew the answer to?

There's a crashing sound and Harry rushes to see what appeared to be that overly intricate almost-ugly antique vase that he hated, smashed to smithereens on the cold stone in front of the fireplace. Only it isn't a vase, because there are ashes everywhere that didn't come from inside the fireplace, (Kreacher kept it clean as a whistle) and now the house elf is in tears, mourning Mistress What's-Her-Face, dashed all over his living room floor.

Draco cackles with glee as Kreacher rushes to find another container for Draco's Great-Great-Great Aunt Whoever.

Draco's laugh sounds thin and reedy in the house, and it's not at all like the mocking laugh he used to have, but Harry thinks it's a good sound, all the same. He had never really laughed in the hospital, so it must be a sign that he's getting better.

He remembers one night distinctly, lying on the cold, frozen ground in late September, huddled amongst a dozen other bodies for warmth. He had looked up at a sky that seemed like an upside-down well, one where you would never see the bottom. He hadn't been able to sleep, his back felt lined with stones, with only two thin blankets and his

clothes between him and the ground. "I think I've got a stick up my arse," he had mumbled – and Ron had looked over at him and laughed, and then so did he –laughs that started out as brittle as frost and then turned boisterous and hearty in the chill air. He had thought that he could hear Malfoy's laugh then, maybe with the comment – 'And that's not all you've got up there' - but that had just been his imagination, and when the laughter died, the air seemed awfully silent, still.

He hasn't thought of that night in a long time.

Looking at Draco's open, smiling face, it's easy to not think about times like that. Looking at Draco's open, smiling, face, it's easy to reach out and touch him, stroke a soothing hand down his back so that he grins and looks up at Harry in an achingly familiar way, while Kreacher gets the last little bits and pieces of Great-Great-Great Aunt Som, frothing-or-Other.

Surely there are the little touches, the safe touches that are okay. Harry can touch his cheek and stroke his hair, can rub his back and hold him, touch his arms and his wrists and even the horrible raised tattoo of a skull and snake that upsets Draco and makes him shiver.

Harry tries not to think about all the things that they used to do, all the things he could be doing, right now. They relate to each other in other ways, don't they? All those times that he had visited him in the hospital, the thoughts had never even crossed his mind; not with Draco so pale and smelling medicinal, not with his own crossed wires in his crossed mind.
Why should it be any different, here in his empty house, with the study filled with papers and plans from all those years ago, some of them starting to fade and yellow at the edges?

Everything is absolutely innocent. He doesn't even let himself kiss him, least of all on the mouth, although sometimes when he pulls him to himself, his lips brush the softness of his cheek, and his nose buries into his hair.

Harry considers making a List of Okay-Touching and Not-Okay Touching. Just as a set of guidelines to check from time to time.

Top of thigh is Okay, he decides. Inside of thigh is a big No-No.

Stomach is Okay, and so is bellybutton. But anything even lower than that? Absolutely Not Okay.

Light stroking is Okay, petting is Okay, even tickling is Okay and some kinds of rubbing. It's just certain areas that are Not Okay.

He can do this. He can beat this thing.

At first, Harry thought it would be awkward, living with him, had worried about the strangeness of having someone so obviously sick in his house, the strangeness of this stranger, but Draco makes it easy. He's responsive and smiling and so visibly happy. If left in the hospital, he would have withered away, surely, would have dried up and crinkled, not unfolded like a flower. He needs Harry in bed with him at night and he smiles at him first thing in the morning, and he blossoms under the affection.

Real Draco isn't like that, though, of course, so Harry makes sure, every now and again, to think up insults that real Draco would say, and if they were too mean, well, this Draco would always laugh it off. Harry makes sure to order expensive things from catalogues, and have them delivered to outside the house, gourmet foods and bath products and lotions, even if he can't tell the difference between brands and qualities, this is the life that Draco is used to, and he knows that he can give it to him.

One thing Harry has to do is to work on his speech. The stutter bothers him the most. Harry wonders if Draco stuttered as a child, if maybe Lucius Malfoy made him practise talking around marbles – that was something that they did to children, didn't they, to teach proper diction.

Harry would never do something like that to Draco. He's so much better for him than his father was.

Harry would never fill a child's mind with bigotry or teach him dubious morals – children were innocent, and all of that was learned behaviour, and if Draco had been a twat back in school he wasn't actually the one to blame. Ginny had mentioned on more than one occasion that Harry would make an excellent father; Harry had counted this as a compliment of the highest degree, considering that the only thing he had learned from his own father figures was never to die on someone who depended on you.

Harry tries to teach him what Real Draco would say but it comes out all wrong. Draco used to spit out "Pot-ter," each syllable clear, all his hate in that perfect P, a soft T in the middle, ending in a hard R.

He Owls Hermione for speech therapy books. It's something he can fix,

he's sure, given enough time.

Draco sounds just like himself, however, when he moans softly in his sleep. Harry always freezes then and bites his lip, tries to think the best Unsexy Thought that he can.

Argus Filch in a g-string with Mrs. Norris, Argus Filch in a g-string with Mrs. Norris....

He had gone sixteen years of his life without touching Draco, and since then he has gone 6 years afterwards without touching him. Surely he can do this.

Draco needs him, after all, to be his Hero and Saviour when no one else can be.

Then again, Real Draco had never expected that from him. Real Draco had expected him to be less than what everyone else had wanted him to be, had expected him to be idiotic and moronic and just plain lucky. He had expected him to be all too human; he had expected him to die.

Harry closes his eyes and takes comfort in matching his breaths with Draco's breathing at night.

There are moments, of course, when he needs him. Harry tries not to think of anything when he wanks in the shower, focusing on the feel of his own hand, slick and tight upon his flesh. Years of practise have taught him how to touch himself just the way he likes, and he's an expert at bringing himself off while keeping his mind pleasantly blank.

He hasn't thought about Draco in years, really, not until...not until he's brought him home. He can't let himself think of him that way, because they're not like that anymore. He tries not to even when the wet dreams plague him and he wakes up with sheets that are twisted and sticky, a mess in his pyjamas and Draco, innocent, just next to him.

For his own sense of self, he tries to keep his mind blank.

But with the blonde sleeping so peacefully just in his bedroom, in his bed, twisted around in blankets and sheets that smell of him, resting his head on pillows where Harry rests his head...

The images fill him up, and he can't get them out. When he comes it's always far too quick, far quicker than he has in all the years after the war; he feels like a teenager again.

He presses his forehead against the tile of the shower wall and does not come out again for a long time.

But it's okay, it's all okay, as long as Harry doesn't touch him. He can't ruin him, can't taint him, not when he's so pure and innocent now, wiped of memory and sin.

And so he plays music for him and he reads to him, he bathes him and brushes his hair, he curls around him in bed and he doesn't touch him - not in any wrong ways, at least - and yes, yes, they can be happy together.

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-"A man is not an orange. You can't eat the fruit and throw the peel away"-

There was something bonding about working together to trap a thing of escaped orange gloop.

Horror of horrors, Malfoy was becoming...(are you ready for it?) *tolerable*.

Harry didn't know when it happened, but one day when eating with Ron and Hermione and Ron was complaining about how unflattering the girls' uniform skirts were and how it didn't show off enough leg and Hermione was getting ready to hit him, Harry, unbidden, thought of what Malfoy might say in response.

And then he was immediately horrified at himself.

It was reassuring, then, that Malfoy was still a twat the majority of the time. In Potions class, Malfoy tried to pour some sort of acid on him and managed to melt part of the sleeve of his robe. Harry retaliated later, however, when he took a frog liver (from the mess that was the disassembled frog) and slid it down the back of his shirt.

Then one evening, up to their regular workout routine, it just so happened that there was the sound of footsteps making their way down the hall.

"Shit," Malfoy said, looking up and down the hall.

"Shit," Harry said, when he did the same and realised the same, that there was nowhere to hide.

"If we get into trouble, Potter," Malfoy growled, voice low, fisting his hands in the cloth of his robes, "I'm going to kill you so dead that your own dead mother will not recognise you."

Harry thought that this threat did not make sense at all and would have said so if they were not so pressed for time. He thought quick; his Invisibility Cloak was the most obvious solution, of course, but then Malfoy would know that he had one...The footsteps got closer. Harry made a split-second decision.

"An Invisibility Cloak!" Malfoy crowed with triumph. (It was a low crow, of course, so that they wouldn't be heard.) "I always knew it!"

"How'd you..." Harry began.

"Come now, Potter," Malfoy said, and rolled his eyes. "Just because you're dumb as a brick, please spare everyone the judgment that they are on the same brick- level as you."

"Oh, shut up, Malfoy," Harry hissed, and he shook out the Cloak, slammed Malfoy up against the wall, pressed himself in close and covered them both.

"Don't...say...a...word..." he mouthed to Malfoy as the footsteps approached. Malfoy rolled his eyes. Harry tried to make a face at him but their faces were so close together that it was making him quite crossed-eyed to do it. Any closer and their *skin* would be touching, and that would be just weird.

Who else but Argus Filch, doing his nightly patrols. With the aide of the Marauder's Map, Harry had been able to avoid him before, but this time they were both just unlucky.
Malfoy's body was warm against his. It was getting hot underneath the Cloak, their breath and body heat filling up the small area. Harry could feel the pounding of the blonde's heart against his own chest, the sharp angles of his body that he knew so well by know. Malfoy's hair was tickling his cheek and he resisted the urge to brush it away. Malfoy's breath was tickling his face and Harry resisted the urge to make him stop breathing because it was horribly distracting.

Meanwhile, Malfoy seemed to be making seizure-faces. He was alternately pouting and scrunching his nose, and then twitching it like some sort of small furry creature, scenting the trail. Ferrets had twitchy noses, didn't they? He wasn't sure. Rabbits did, but Malfoy and bunnies didn't seem to go too well together, unless there were some sort of torture involved, although his father did have that furry hat and--

"*What's wrong with you?*" Harry mouthed. Filch was probably five feet away from where they were, pressed up against the wall.

"*Itches*," Malfoy mouthed back. Unable to believe he was doing this and feeling utterly ridiculous about it, Harry reached up with the hand that wasn't holding the Cloak in place and scratched that supposedly precious (not cute) nose. And it all worked out until it looked like Malfoy was about to sneeze.

Thinking quickly, Harry clamped his hand down over Malfoy's nose and mouth. Grey eyes went comically wide with both indignation and

possibly suffocation. Harry could see his long lashes, the colour of ash, in disturbingly sharp focus. His skin was soft against his palm.

The seconds and minutes stretched out, and Filch was taking his sweet-arse time in passing them by. Malfoy's breath was hot and kind of wet against his hand – gross. Harry's entire body was tense, and everywhere they touched felt far, far too hot. His skin was flushed with the heat of being under the Cloak and the horrible tension of their situation, their hearts trying to compete in the best staccato rhythm contest. He could feel his glasses fogging up. He could see sweat begin to bead on Malfoy's brow, just one single drop of it trickling in a tiny clear path down his face.

Finally, finally, the footsteps moved away and then their echo slowly faded down the hall. Harry heaved a sigh of relief. Malfoy glared at him and then licked his hand –soft and warm and wet and gross- causing Harry to stumble back, jerking his hand back so suddenly and with such violence that he almost hit himself in the face.

"Augh! You're *disgusting*," Harry hissed, rubbing his hand vigorously on his thigh.

"You should talk," Malfoy said, making exaggerated gagging faces and wiping his tongue on his sleeve, saying "bleh!" with each wipe. "Bleh! Bleh bleh bleh!" He made a show of spitting at the air, which reminded Harry of an upset cat. "Ugh, nasty. You taste like...like...I don't even know. There are no words for something this repulsive."

Harry could still feel his the heat-imprint of a body under his, so very clearly. He looked at Malfoy for a moment.

"You wash your hands don't you?" The blonde continued blithely, still pulling faces. "Blech. Ick. God, please tell me you do. If I get sick because you suffer from a lack of proper hygiene..."

And then he grabbed him, fingers tightening in a circle around a thin wrist, pinning it above his head, against the wall.

Malfoy gasped.

"What—what're you—"

Harry pulled his sleeve down and was surprised to find it completely clean and unmarred. Just plain white, smooth skin, no incriminating marks at all. It was as pale and pure as a blank piece of parchment.

Somehow that made things better. It made it okay.

"Fucking arsehole," Malfoy said, face going even paler – colourless, almost, as he realised what Harry had been checking for. He snatched his wrist out of Harry's grip and held it to his own chest, as if he had just been wounded. "Get the fuck away from me." Violently he shoved him back; Harry stumbled and landed with a smack on his arse; it would probably bruise. The Invisibility Cloak draped across his legs so that he was just a torso with disconnected trainers peeking out the bottom.

Malfoy glared down at him, expression cold and closed. He shook his head, and gave him a look of pure contempt and disgust.

Without a word, he turned on his heel and swept away. Harry sat on the cold floor for several long moments afterwards, staring up at the space where the blonde had been.

Malfoy hadn't even bothered to hit him.

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-"How helpless we are, like netted birds, when caught by desire."-

When Draco is just standing there, it's so easy to call his name, to imagine him turning around and being greeted with a familiar sneer instead of that easy, open smile he wears for Harry, these days. When they're sitting together and Harry is reading to him, blonde head resting against his cheek, it's easy to almost feel the way that the slender pale fingers would reach for him, trace designs on the exposed skin of one wrist. When he feeds him, sometimes, he watches his mouth, watching it wrap around the fork, watching it chew and swallow and the way a pink tongue sweeps across his lips, easy to think it's a romantic luxury rather than a necessity.

It's not madness, is it, if he's just remembering, albeit he's remembering events that never actually happened.

Harry has taken to not moving in bed, keeping himself as still as a corpse. He's getting less and less sleep at night, but it's worth it, the feel of that body so very warm and wonderful against his.

Later on he thinks of it, the memory of the feel, and he lets his mind and more distant memories fill in the rest. The way Draco always felt under his hands, the way he arched up and cried for him, clenching around him, the harsh, sloppy way he always kissed, as if everything were an attack.

His hand moves rapidly on himself, stroking firmly and quickly, thumb smearing the clear slick of precum over the head of it.

He's so absorbed that he doesn't even hear it when bathroom door creaks open slowly.

He's so far gone, caught somewhere in between temptation and memory that he's lost to everything but the tight feel of his own hand wrapped around himself, eyes closed and thinking on how good it had always felt to be buried inside Draco, in his arse or in his mouth. He can't even think about anything else until he finally comes, biting his lip to keep from crying out, and he doesn't open his eyes until he's stopped trembling and shaking, and his body is his own again.

His vision is bleary but he finds Draco watching him, a little amazed.

"Draco!" Harry says, quickly, "you weren't supposed to see that."

Draco looks at him with surprise. "Harry...you were..."

Potter, he hears, *didn't save some for me?*

He can see it all too clearly, the subtle upwards twist of the lips, an expression both mocking and seductive. The way that Draco might push him back down, run both hands up the sides of his ribs, tease and tease him until he was hard and ready to go again.

In an instant he's reaching out already, and this Draco is coming towards him, eyes bright and curious, and it'd be so easy, so so easy, to touch and then to take--

Harry is absolutely horrified.

"Draco, don't," he says, and he wipes his dirty hand with tissue and he quickly tucks himself back into his trousers.

He doesn't want to answer any awkward questions about sexuality (would he have to explain that all over again, too? Like to a child – the birds and the bees, and whatever that means, Harry doesn't even know, it's not like the Dursleys ever gave him that talk. He shudders at the thought of Uncle Vernon attempting to talk to him about sex). He doesn't want to think about any of it at all. It's horrible what he's just done; he feels as if he's desecrated something here, violated some sort of trust. He wants to turn around and puke straight into the toilet he'd just been sitting on.

"H-Harry," Draco manages. "Wh-what was..?"

"Nothing," Harry says, quickly. "Absolutely nothing."

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-"Here's to alcohol – the cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems."-

For all of the week following, Malfoy avoided him. Harry received no demanding, bossy Owls. He didn't make eye contact with him in the halls, and made sure to work on the other side of the classroom if they were in detention together.

Harry felt bloody awful, of course – he knew exactly what it felt like to be accused of being something horrible that you weren't. So what if Malfoy had been a snotty twat in all the years that he'd known him? He'd discovered another side to him in these past several weeks, when he was beating the shit out of him. Er, that side being, of course, that of human punching bag. Who didn't kill him when he had the opportunity. Of course he was still a nasty git and a twat, but Harry was, if anything, willing to forgive his enemies -within reason.
When this didn't let up for a week and then week two set in, guilt turned into frustration and then righteous indignation. Harry was sick and fucking tired of it. Where did Malfoy get off, giving him this attitude. Sure, he hadn't known that Malfoy was *innocent* – but how could he have known that he hadn't run off and obediently joined Daddy's gang of cronies?

It was ridiculous, really. After all, Harry had had every right to suspect him of what he had suspected him of.

Malfoy really didn't need to get all huffy about it.

Halfway through week two, Harry had enough stored up frustration and indignation that he was ready to fight Malfoy again. Whether the blonde wanted it or not. His nightmares had begun returning and Hermione had noted that he was "off his feed." Ron had suggested a feedbag, in that case.

But things with Ron and Hermione were rocky lately, and so was their advice, as a result. They weren't rocky with Harry, of course, but Ron had started a very public affair with Lavender Brown, and the two were apparently doing Dementor-impressions everywhere they went, trying to suck each other's souls out through their mouths. Harry was neutral about Lavender – she was very pretty, even if she wasn't quite all there upstairs, but she was just the type of girl that Hermione despised, and so this led to frequent fights between his two best friends.

"Lavender's all right, I suppose," Hermione had said, "if you like that vacant-eyed, air-headed, flighty type of girl."

Ron had been deaf to the implied criticism, eyes shining with the ardour of being in a new relationship. "Yeah! I mean, do you have any idea what she looks like naked? I haven't seen, not yet, but I've got an idea and hey! Hermione, you'd know, wouldn't you? Hermione, where are you going?"

Harry had attempted to comfort her, but somehow his efforts proved fruitless.

Every night, Harry pulled out the Marauder's Map, and he watched the little black dot named D. Malfoy move about the castle after hours. What was he doing? What was he up to, if not horribly evil Death Eater things? Was he meeting someone else, getting into trouble with someone else?

He had had enough of this shit.

Wrapped in his Invisibility Cloak, he stalked through the halls of Hogwarts, until he came to outside the an empty lounge. It must have been an old faculty lounge – as far as he knew, no one actually lounged there.

Malfoy was in the room, in the darkness, his pale hair and skin white against black. He looked like a black and white photograph. He was seated in a high-backed chair, sloshing a snifter glass of -brandy? Firewhiskey? – amber-coloured liquid sloppily.

"Well, well, well," Malfoy said, "look what the drag catted in." He frowned. "You know what I mean."

"Malfoy," Harry said. "Malfoy, you're drunk."

"An apt observation, Potter," Malfoy said, and then seemed to be taken by how amusing his name was, looking contemplatively at nothing at all. "Potter. Pitter. Patter. Potter. Putter. Peter...Pickled...Pepper..." He laughed. "Gold stars!"

He took another sip from his (rather wet) glass, coughed, and then made a face at it.

"Ugh! God, that burns." He shook his head.

Harry was staring at him in a sort of shock. What did one do with a drunken Malfoy, anyway? ...Put him in a longboat until he's sober?

"I've always hated you. You're a sad, path--*pathetic* excuse for a human being, and the very sight of you is enough to ruin my day," Malfoy said, and took another sip, and coughed again.

"What're you doing here? Are you stalking me? You're stalking me, aren't you. You've got an unhealthy...unhealthy fizzation, that's what you've got, an unhealthy fixanation."

Harry sighed. "Look, I just wanted to say...erm. Sorry."

Malfoy blinked, and shook his head as if to clear it. This, of course, made his head hurt, and he abruptly stopped, wavering in place, squinting at Harry. "Are you apologising to me? *You*? Apologising to *me*?"

"Yes," Harry said, made a face and bit down on his pride. It filled his mouth with bitter juice, like biting into rotten fruit.

"O, I never thought I'd live to see the day!" Malfoy intoned, in evangelical preacher tones. "The Great Harry Potter is deigning to step down from his throne on high to apologise to a mere mortal as myself _"

Harry took a deep breath. "I am *trying* to apologise to you, if you'd let me—"

"Oh," Malfoy said. "Well, get on with it, then."

Harry closed his eyes, opened them again. He looked down at the floor and then off to the side, "I'm sorry I thought you were a Death Eater even though I had every reason to believe it."

"That's a crap apology," Malfoy declared. "Not accepted!" He swished his glass imperiously and settled back into the chair as if it were a throne, one arm placed languorously on the armrest. He waved the hand holding the glass in a dismissive motion, sloshing alcohol over the sides of it. "Begone, I tire of thee."

Harry gritted his teeth. "Fine, I'm sorry I was wrong."

"You were...what?" Malfoy prompted.

"Wrong," Harry said, spitting the word out.

"Someone needs to teach you the proper way to apologise," Malfoy sighed, shaking his head ruefully. "It's a skill that you evidently lack." He gave Harry a look that was pure pity. "You poor, pathetic sod."

"I'm not going to take this, Malfoy," Harry said. He should have known that this was useless. Why did he ever think that apologising was a good idea? He hadn't even done anything wrong. Not like Malfoy had been working so hard to keep him from thinking that he was evil, between all the insults and the fighting. "Whatever." He turned to leave.

"No, no, don't go yet," he was surprised to hear Malfoy say. "Don't be such a pussy, Putter. Here, have a drink with me."

Malfoy didn't always make sense, Harry knew, even without the alcohol. He deliberated for a moment, but he was underage and drinking was automatically fun. "Fine," he said, and approached the throne.

Malfoy held out the wet glass, looking elegant and superior and supreme and also supremely drunk. Harry took it from him and then took a large gulp and almost spit it out. He immediately coughed and spluttered, "S-strong."

It burned all the way down his throat and it was still burning.

Malfoy grinned. "I know. I can't feel anything right now, and I feel bloody fantastic."

Harry took another sip, and coughed again.

"Anyway!" Malfoy said. "In order to properly apologise, one needs to get on his knees. And maybe you should crawl to me. I'll perhaps even let you kiss my ring."

"You don't wear rings," Harry pointed out.

"That's not the point. Twat. Don't interrupt when grown-ups are speaking," Malfoy said. Harry rolled his eyes. "I think I'd like to see some grovelling. Do you think you could handle that, Potty? Grovelling?"

Harry let out a long-suffering sigh. "Malfoy, I made a mistake about your character. It's not like I –"

Killed your family, he almost said, but realised quickly that that was

in horribly poor taste. Probably on the same level as 'put your father in jail.'

"You what?"

"Nothing," Harry said quickly. He took another sip of the alcohol. He was going to need it.

"I've been *wronged*," Malfoy said. "So go on, tell me about how you're wrong."

Harry sighed. Of course Malfoy wasn't going to make this easy. "I'm sorry for misjudging you."

"Because why?" Malfoy needled him.

"I was wrong."

"You're what?"

"Wrong," Harry said again.

"And what else?"

"I'm sorry?"

"No, other than that."

"I don't know what else! God, what do you want from me, *blood*?"

"That'd be nice," Malfoy said, smiling agreeably at the suggestion. "No, no. You're also a dickhole. And an arse. And a complete tosser."

"I'm not saying that!" Harry said, grumpily, taking another swig of brandy – he was pretty sure it was brandy, at any rate, it was the type of expensive thing that Malfoy would have, no matter how he got his hands on it. It made him feel warm.

"Fine, fine," Malfoy sighed. "Can I hear it again? I need to savour this moment."

"I'm sorry that I wanted to apologise," Harry muttered.

Malfoy said, "What?" And then, "No, no, wait. I need to get into the right mindset." He closed his eyes and took several obvious breaths: inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. "Okay.
Okay, I'm ready. Tell it to me again."

"I'm sorry I was wrong about you," Harry mumbled.

"Very good," Malfoy finally said. "Apology accepted, but you're still a cunt. Cheers!" he said, suddenly, even though they only had one glass between them. He grabbed the snifter from Harry, mimed clinking the glass against an invisible one in Harry's hand, and then took a large sip and coughed before making Harry drink, too.

Harry shook his head and rolled his eyes and allowed himself to consider the notion that Malfoy wasn't half-bad like this; but then again, that was probably the alcohol talking.
Between the two of them, the snifter soon ran empty. (Harry had more, because Malfoy insisted that he had a lot of catching up to do.) The world buzzed pleasantly. The universe hummed around them. Harry couldn't remember the last time he actually felt like this. Not since Sirius, surely. Contentment had become a stranger to him.

"No more!" Malfoy cried, the sound of loss in his voice as he peered into the empty glass, as if mourning the death of a lover. "We musht get more."

"I think you've had enough," Harry said. Malfoy was looking kind of wobbly to him and he cast about for his glasses, wondering when and why he would have taken them off, when he realised they were still on his face.

"No, you'll know when I've had enough," Malfoy said, "'cause I shall let you know. I'll tell you." He frowned. "That didn't come out right."

With a determined look and a cry of "More!" he pushed himself to his feet and took a step forward. Two steps and he promptly stumbled, crashing into Harry, who was in the process of catching him. Malfoy, propelled by his forward momentum, pulled them both down on the ground, one hand still clutching the glass.

"That was not the best...the best of ideas," Malfoy said, his voice muffled against Harry's chest.

"No, not really," Harry said. He looked down and Malfoy's hair was a pale blur and so he carded his fingers through it, lifting up a few strands to watch them glint in the moonlight before letting them fall back down.

"...stop that," Malfoy chided without much venom. He made a half-hearted attempt at getting up but then gave up quickly. Instead he wriggled a little atop Harry's body, getting comfortable.

"It's a good thing you're fat," Malfoy said. "It makes for satis...satisfactory pillowing."

"Fat?" Harry echoed. That was a new one.

"S-Stocky, if you prefer," Malfoy said, and then giggled maniacally, a disturbing sound, worthy of the most unhinged evil genius.

Harry felt indignant, and was about to protest that body issues was something he'd really rather not deal with on top of everything else. But Malfoy's head was resting just under his chin, hair tickling softly on his neck. His breath smelled like the brandy and it was warm and heady and moist.

"If I don't remember any of this," Malfoy slurred, "will you do it again?"

"Yeah," Harry said, relaxing fully into the floor, feeling the weight of the warm body pressing him down, but not in an uncomfortable way. It was like being covered by a warm, solid, living blanket. That annoyed you and made you want to pound it into submission most of the time, but for right now it was okay. "Yeah, I'll do it again."

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-"If I love you, what business is it of yours?"-

Harry doesn't leave the house much, these days – why should he? He has everything he could possibly want, right where he wants it. Kreacher's been good even, even if he talks to Master Malfoy more than Harry, but somehow Harry finds it hard to mind. Draco still stutters, but he's making progress. "Baby steps," he tells Hermione, talking into the fireplace. "Thanks for the books."

There is the matter, of course, of wanting and wanting and not being able to get it, but you couldn't place a price on the peace of mind he has, just knowing that Draco is here and by his side at all times.

"That's wonderful news, Harry," Hermione says, and her voice is genuinely warm, matching the heat the fire radiated into his home. "You know, Ron and I would really love to see you. We could leave Rose at Molly's..."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Harry says, glancing at something behind his shoulder. "Wait—what?" he calls into the room. "Okay, sorry, Hermione, I really have to go. Draco needs me. We'll talk later, okay?"

Without waiting for a reply, he gets up and leaves, heading for the study.

Draco hasn't actually been calling him, but it's not like he was lying to Hermione; Draco does need him, after all. Draco has always needed him.

"Draco, what did you do to the walls?" he asks, the minute he enters the room.

"C-c-c...co-loured 'em, H-Harry," Draco says, a note of pride in his voice, almost, the same way he once would have offered his decorative advice.

"It's... er..." it's horrible really, but not because it looks like a child did it. It's horrible because it looks like a war scene, and Harry sees bodies torn to pieces, inside out, leaking myriads of colours. "I can't keep it on the wall."

Draco's grey eyes - so innocent now, child's eyes in an adult face - show only innocent disappointment. Harry wonders if he even thought

when he drew, if he knew what his hands were sketching. If he looks too close, he might even recognise faces, names, dates and places. All those facts that Professor Binns could never make him memorise in A History of Magic. Except this isn't just history, this is his history, his war. Their war.

"Draco," Harry says, voice soft but intent. "Do you...do you remember?" He'd rather not have him remember this part of it, the horrors and the tangled mess of bloody limbs and bodies, but it's a good start. Because if he does remember, and then maybe he'd remember more, the really important things and all the things between them, and all the reasons that Harry always wanted, need to know, and needed to know still --

Draco shakes his head, grey eyes wide and baleful.

Harry sighs, but he sits down on an red armchair, holding out his hand so that Draco can come and sit on his lap. As for Lap-sitting – Harry isn't quite sure if that is an Okay Touch or a Not-Okay Touch, so he only allows it every other day.

He has to try very hard not to get...well, hard, what with the swell of Draco's buttocks pressed against his crotch, and he's not sure how Okay that is. Probably not very.
He tenses a little, but feels content when Draco's body settles against his.

Perhaps he should get out. He should go back to work. He has taken a "personal leave" – the one that they had been encouraging him to take for...the last six years, probably. He had gotten a job as an Auror as soon as they would give him the examination, and he hadn't taken a holiday since then. With the amount of sick leave he's stored up, he could probably take a holiday for two years, if he wanted to. For years he's tended to try and lose himself in work, devoting himself to cases and the ensuing paperwork, always asking for new assignments. Partners are either terrified of him or eventually run ragged, or c.) a mix of both. Sleep was for the weak, Harry had decided, in those early days of war.
Had he gotten that turn of phrase from Draco? It seems like something Draco would have said. "Sleep is for the weak!" he would have declared, brandishing a quill, shadows smudged under his pale and bloodshot eyes, and then he would have fallen asleep on top of his parchment and drooled. When he awoke, he might have inkstains on one side of his face that he would later deny.

It could have happened, although Harry isn't completely sure whether it actually did happen or not.

Even now, Draco still drools a little in his sleep, and sometimes he coos, softly. When he's asleep he's just Draco, neither the one from the past nor this strange child of the present, and Harry doesn't have to differentiate between the two nor feel bad for wanting one more than the other.

But really, he should socialise Draco, maybe, slowly introduce him to company again. Maybe he should look into therapy again. He should get him a nurse to bathe him and take care of him, he should make him sleep in his own bed.

There's a world of difference between the things he should do and the things he can make himself do.

When Draco's asleep, Harry holds him close and touches him softly, running his fingers up and down his smooth back. "*Potter*," Real Draco might have purred, if he had done the same back then. He would have looked at him, eyes soft and sleepy, hair mussed (and Harry would not comment on it, if he knew what was good for him), and rolled them both over so that he could nip sharply at his throat. "Tickles, Harry," this Draco might giggle, a little breathlessly, and then Harry would kiss him and kiss him until he didn't feel like giggling anymore.

He can do this, when Draco is asleep, innocent and unknowing. Then he doesn't have to distinguish between Good Touch and Bad Touch, even, he can just let it be what it is – his fingers on that pale skin, exploring, discovering, tracing over peaks and valleys and all those ghost-marks of old scars.

Harry has only slept with –in the sharing a bed, literal sense – two people in his life, one being Ginny, the other Draco. He's had sex with more people than just them; he remembers the times in between, before Ginny but after Draco, or between Ginny and Draco, when his loneliness would send him to find a bar and a blonde. The bar would be Muggle of course, couldn't have the Daily Prophet suddenly speculating about his unfulfilled fantasy life, and the blonde could be just about anyone – in the dark, when he took off his glasses, all he needed was the hair colour and similar body build and his memory. He was always too disgusted with himself afterwards to let them stay. He told himself that maybe he just had a type, but when he sometimes said the wrong name during sex he knew that it wasn't all as simple as that.

This is Draco in his arms, now, even if he can't touch him in all the ways he wants to. The person that he is sleeping with is the same person that he is thinking of. When he slept with Ginny it was businesslike, the two of them on opposite sides of the bed, sharing it until morning. Occasionally she would fling an arm over his stomach or press her face into his shoulder, but she was hard to sleep with because she moved around a lot in her sleep and she tended to kick. Harry knew that he was hard to sleep with on account of his nightmares, where he might wake and still be back in the mire of mud and bodies. The entire time(s) that they dated, the times that they actually shared a bed he could count on his fingers.

Harry doesn't have many nightmares these days; hasn't had any since Draco's come to stay. This may be because he's so exhausted from holding himself still and his mind is so exhausted from telling himself no and most of his dreams are wet dreams, just like being a teenager again. Draco doesn't need to know any of this and so he doesn't plan to tell him.

He touches him and soothes him, making sure that he won't ever want anything more than this, that he won't be able to think of anything more comforting than Harry's touch on his skin.

Harry skims his touch over a sharp, jutting hip, feeling the shape of it and dipping his fingers ever so slightly inside, over and over and Draco shivers a little and shifts in his sleep.

Harry pulls him closer.

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-"My passions were all gathered together, like fingers that made a fist."-

"Hold still for just a moment, would you, do you really want another ugly scar?" Malfoy said, his hand cupping Harry's cheek while he pointed his wand at him with the other.

They were sitting on one of the moving staircases together, this one having moved to just the right angle to sufficiently hide them from the view of anybody who might be walking around at this hour.

Harry stared at Malfoy's wand, going cross-eyed before closing his eyes. He could feel Malfoy's breath on his skin. He held still and held his own breath. He didn't know why – force of habit, he supposed. Malfoy had been...not nice, but tolerable, towards him, especially since that drunken night they had spent together, where they had woken up on the floor with splitting headaches and vowed not to speak of it again.

And now, while Harry still loved to hit him, he found it harder and harder to hate him. He still hurt him, of course, but found it less of a necessity to rip him apart.

The feel of fingers burned on his cheek and a warm tingling spreading through his skin. He could feel grey eyes watching him intently, making sure there were no lingering bruises.

"Done," Malfoy said, and then the touch was gone. Then it was his turn, and their positions reversed, and Harry touched Malfoy's cheek just a moment, pressing in on the bruise smudging a fine cheekbone. Malfoy flinched from the pain, eyes squeezing shut for the briefest of moments and Harry steadied his wand.

The light glowed from his wand as he cast the Healing charms, and as always he was fascinated by the sight of the pale skin becoming perfect once again. The bruises receded, pulling up into themselves before disappearing. He imagined the network of capillaries knitting themselves back together, the blood returning to its vessels, all underneath the flawless skin smoothing over. A swollen eye unswelled, blinked, and opened wide and grey. The cut on Malfoy's lip zipped itself up, leaving only the wet red shine of blood behind.

Their eyes met. Harry realised that Malfoy had been watching Harry watch him. Harry cleared his throat and dropped his wand, pulling

away.

Malfoy dropped his gaze.

"I brought water," he said, and he brought out a bottle that was enchanted to stay chilled, moisture beading on the frosted glass. "Beating you is thirsty work."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You mean having your arse handed on you is thirsty work," he corrected, with a bit of a smile.

Malfoy shrugged and smirked. "Well, I'm sure you're thirsty, too."

He lifted the bottle and began to drink from it, eyes closing in apparent ecstasy. Harry watched the water trickle out of his mouth, watched the way his throat bobbed when he drank, muscles and tendons flexing in a slender, pale throat. A few strands of hair, dark gold with sweat, clung to the side of his face.

Harry swallowed, feeling his mouth go dry. Malfoy was right; he was surprised how thirsty their activities had made him.

"What's it like?" Harry asked, when Malfoy had finished and let out a happy "I'm so refreshed" sigh.

"Like diving into the cool glacial springs of ancient, mystical Norway," Malfoy said. "What do you expect, Potter? It's water. It tastes like water. I'm thirsty, so it's particularly enjoyable." He took another gulp, opened his eyes, noticed Harry watching him again and quirked his lips. "Well, do you want some?"

"Yeah," Harry said, and reached for the bottle, which Malfoy pulled out of his reach, still smirking.

"Don't be barbaric, Potter," he said, keeping the bottle tantalisingly, teasingly, just out of his reach. "If you want something, ask for it."

"Fine. Can I have some?"

"I don't know, *can* you?"

"With you, Malfoy, it's *can*, not *may*."

Malfoy laughed. "Fair enough. I suppose I shall let you, but you owe me." He smoothly handed the bottle over.

Harry hesitated just a moment before he lifted it to his lips, his mouth

against the mouth of the bottle, his lips over where Malfoy's lips had been.

It was cool and refreshing and Malfoy was looking at him.

Rudely, Malfoy snatched the bottle away, "Stop hogging it."

"I barely got to drink any!" Harry protested, pulling it back.

A brief scuffle over the bottle ensued, a tug-of-war between the two of them, the bottle cold and wet and slippery in his grasp. Cold water spilled and splashed over the steps.
Malfoy was pulling it back, keeping it above his own head before Harry made a quick manoeuvre and snatched it from him. He lifted it up to his mouth to take a drink and then Malfoy hit the bottom of it, so that the cold water splashed onto his face and dripped onto his robes.

Harry spluttered and upended the bottle over Malfoy's head.

Malfoy spluttered with indignation, comically soaked. His blonde hair plastered to his head and – since he had taken off his robes for their fight – the water had soaked his shirt, causing it to cling to his body.

Harry pointed and laughed.

"You...look...like..." He gasped for breath.

"Very funny, Potter. I'm going to beat you to death with this bottle," Malfoy declared. He gripped the bottle by the neck like a weapon, splashing water everywhere since it wasn't empty.

"You're wasting it," Harry pointed out, and then Malfoy splashed the water at him. Harry reached around his body, grabbing the bottle from him from the other side. He held it a few inches up over his open mouth and drank, water trickling out from the side of his mouth.

When he looked at Malfoy again, he was watching him. He dangled the bottle tantalisingly out of his reach.

"If you want something, ask for it," Harry said, grinning, cleverly turning Malfoy's own words around on him.

And then, for reasons that he would never know, (especially not now, he would never know, now) Malfoy leaned forward and licked him, slowly, up his jaw.

Harry froze.

A red tongue had extended, and very carefully licked. It was cold and wet and soft against his skin, and he supposed it caught a trickle of water and stopped it in its path.

Things had suddenly taken a turn into very dangerous territory. They completely missed the street For the Worse, and had taken a sharp right onto Very Fucked Up Avenue.

Harry fell backwards, smacking his head on the stair. "What the bloody hell was that?"

Malfoy smirked.

Harry didn't know what Malfoy was playing at, but it disturbed him greatly. Was this a new distraction tactic? If so, it was working, and maybe the blonde was an evil genius after all.

Not knowing what else to do, he responded with his own tactic – stumbling to his feet and punching Draco Malfoy. It might not have been the most brilliant move, but he never really thought of himself as a master strategist.

Malfoy howled with rage as he was knocked backwards, onto the ground. A thin stream of blood trickled out of his nose, bright red.

"What the fuck is wrong with you! You bloody maladjusted freak! Do you really think violence is the answer to everything?!"

Harry couldn't think to respond properly, couldn't explain that he had just licked him and this was the appropriate reaction one had to being so rudely licked. Anger flared up in him, hot and consuming.

"What the hell, Malfoy!" was the best he could come up with. "The hell was that!"

Malfoy snarled and leapt at him, even though he was in the wrong. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he asked. They tussled for a bit but Harry was angrier, and soon he had the blonde pinned underneath his body, chest heaving with the exertion.

Details he would remember later, the smudge of a bruise on a pale cheekbone, the feel of slender wrists under his hands. Malfoy had thin wrists but they were hard bone underneath, bone like iron, surprisingly strong.

Panting above him, he could feel his sweat sticking the collar of his shirt to his skin. His heart was pounding and the adrenaline was coursing, and goddamn, he always felt so alive when he was hurting Malfoy.

In an instant he realised he was hard, and their position took on a different implication entirely. Harry froze; he didn't dare move or else Malfoy might feel it, pressed into his stomach as it were. Malfoy's stomach pressed into him- that flat plane of muscle Harry had only seen in glimpses, pale and covered in purple bruises, red scratches, or sometimes a strip of skin that showed when he fisted his hands in his jumper as if trying to tear him.

Harry held his breath.

Malfoy first looked angry then confused, and then slowly grey eyes widened in the pale face underneath him. Harry thought shit and knew it was too late, but before he could push himself off--

Infuriatingly, Malfoy smirked, pressing up against an erection that had absolutely no right being there. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks," Malfoy drawled, in his annoying customary manner, and it was absolutely ridiculous that the first protest that Harry wanted to make was a high-pitched 'I'm not a lady!'

As if Malfoy couldn't see that.

Or feel that for himself, for that matter.

Harry couldn't help thinking that, just like it had been on the train, it was a dirty, sneaky, underhanded ploy, just like Malfoy, to take advantage of him in his ...er...Petrified State.

Harry wanted to die. He wanted to kill his brain. He wanted to kill Malfoy, then himself – but no, that would just look like some sort of Gay Double Suicide. Or homosexual homicide. Homo-cide.

Malfoy wriggled in a particularly irritating and unnecessary manner under him.

Harry let out a strangled noise and jumped off of Malfoy, practically running back to Gryffindor Tower.

It wasn't in his nature to run away from frightening and dangerous things, but he supposed that this particular situation was an acceptable exception.

He stormed back to Gryffindor Tower, hoping that it was late enough for him to chance and go directly to bed. No such luck, of course – Ron and Lavender Brown were apparently snogging on the couch, their arms wound like tentacles around each other's bodies.

Ron detached himself from Lavender's face momentarily to ask, "Hey, Harry, what's the matter?" Probably taking in his dishevelled and moist state. "Is everything okay?"

"Fine, fine, everything's fine!" Harry responded quickly, so that Ron would know that everything was fine, lest he worry.

"How are you feeling?" Ron asked.

"Perfectly heterosexual, thank you! I mean, fine!" Harry said, and stormed up the stairs to the dormitory.

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-"...it is all a matter of love: the more you love a memory, the stronger and stranger it is."-

If Draco doesn't talk, then it's just like he's set up house with Real Draco. Draco would laugh at this. Draco would want to eat this. And Draco would like to watch television, would like to read these books, would like to listen to this type of music. Somewhere out there, there is another universe, where they both survived the war intact, and this would be his reality.

Draco would insult Harry's taste in furniture. He would hate the curtains, and then he'd complain that, as insult on top of injury to his eyesight, that they didn't match the carpets.
He'd be horrible and picky about his food and maybe insist having Kreacher make some dishes twice. They would fight about what to watch on TV; Draco would probably become addicted to those one-hour dramas where Harry preferred sitcoms and comedies.

Back in school, Harry would hate it when Draco decided he wanted something. When he realised that the git really did intend to get it, Harry tried to avoid him. It didn't work too well, but he couldn't stop trying.

Back then, he had never understood it, how Draco had grown up so spoiled, or why the other Slytherins let him boss them around, even when he was little and *titchy* those first few years of school, before he had hit his growth spurt. He had always figured he had always figured it was his parents' fault - it's *always* the parents' fault, Hermione had calmly explained, once. There was also the possibility that maybe Slytherins were just wimps.

And now, now, he would think, he was beginning to get it.

Draco Malfoy wore you down until you either gave in or got yourself committed to St. Mungo's.

Draco would be imperious, snotty and demanding.

He'd want expensive alcohol that no one would buy, except for weddings or Christmas. He'd want the best of everything.

And they'd be able fight about anything. Like that time, back in school, when they had had the Sheet Discussion.

"These sheets are not silk, Potter. What are you trying to do, kill me?" Draco had said, horrified at the state of his bed.

"They're the school sheets! They're good enough for every other student at Hogwarts," Harry had countered.

Draco had drawn himself up so that he could look down his nose at him, in that condescending way of his. It was a look he had perfected. Harry was sure that he practised it in the mirror, a lot. "Harry," Malfoy said slowly. "Are you suggesting that I am on the same level as these filthy, impoverished, unwashed masses?"

"I'm pretty sure they're not filthy or unwashed, Draco. We do have baths everywhere, you know. I think you'd notice the smell in class."

Draco would make interesting noises when frustrated. Then again, Harry had always privately thought that Draco made interesting noises, period.

Harry can imagine them having the same conversation, now:

"If you want me to sleep in bed with you, change your sheets," Draco would demand. "I have sensitive skin. I am allergic to *poor*."

Look, I've started breaking out already, he'd say. "Oh God, it's contagious!"

"I think that's a freckle," Harry would counter. And then they would get into an argument about whether Malfoys freckled or not and whether Draco's mother really did just get beauty marks.

"Malfoys do not freckle. Malfoys are pureblood. Our very breeding ensures that we are not subject to maladies of the skin. That belongs to *your* lot."

By the end of the day, Harry would want to punch him, which was bad, because that lead to No Sex. (Sometimes.) And then Harry would be cranky, in a punching mood, *and* he'd have been subjected to the unfairness of No Sex. (Sometimes.)

The other times, when they fought and it led to sex anyway – those times were very good. (Mostly.)

In the end, Harry would give in, and buy the fucking silk sheets. He would give in, and buy Malfoy the special gifts he insisted were only what he deserved. He would give in, and turn the adjoining room to

their bedroom – his study – into Malfoy's closet. He would give in and give him the best room in the house for his private study. (Only to later ask him whether he would freckle by the light coming in through the window, and he'd be kicked out of the house for two days.)

But it would never be as bad as it sounded, because when Harry gave in to Draco's ridiculous demands, Draco would give in to *exactly* what Harry wanted.

Draco would have some sort of official job, where he would go to work in dress robes. They would be designer, of course. He'd be so vain about how good he looked in them that Harry would have to fight with him when they went into "Muggle Land." (Draco's words, of course.) Of course, he wouldn't put up a fuss anymore when he discovered how great his arse looked in a tight pair of denim jeans.

They'd fight, but they'd be happy, in this life that is not his.

With Draco around, Harry remembers certain details, now, that he never would have thought to remember before. The certain way he would say, "Divinations," for example, or the way he stuck just the tip of his tongue out between his teeth when he was working on a difficult problem.

This Draco still does that, sometimes, when they're reading together. It makes Harry want to kiss him, suddenly, and then he remembers that he can't. He really shouldn't. This Draco is still a brat sometimes, and Harry can't help from wanting to spoil him. He finds it impossible to deny him anything. This Draco still has the same grace and mannerisms in fleeting moments.

Harry can't live in that other universe, so this one will have to do.

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Harry was thankful that Malfoy didn't have a Marauder's Map to track him down with. At any mention of his name he blushes, and mortifyingly, he thinks about Malfoy's body at night.

He wasn't as smooth at the avoidance game that Malfoy was, considering how much more practise Malfoy had in it, and Harry tended to do just the opposite, seek him out when he shouldn't.

He analysed what happened that night over and over again in his mind, but came up with no answers. He supposed that he could have used a third party's opinion on the matter, but there was no way he could tell either Hermione or, god forbid, Ron.

He was sixteen, and at this age, inappropriate erections happened all the time. It didn't mean a thing.

It didn't mean a thing that he thought about Malfoy all the time, the feel of his skin, the feel of his tongue. It didn't mean a thing that he wanted to fight him, more than ever now.

It didn't mean a thing that he had dreamt of stabbing Malfoy, over and over and over and when he woke up his sheets were sticky and wet and a mess.

Because really, he was sixteen, and at this age, you could have a wet dream about anything. He distinctly remembered having one that involved a broom and a toaster and nothing else. Hermione would have called it a Freudian Field Day and therefore he took care not to mention it to her. Ever ever ever.

Malfoy, of course, was a blight upon his existence, and eventually he cornered Harry, pulling him into an empty classroom between classes.

Harry tried to be angry, but he was more mortified, considering what had happened last time. He tried to lash out but then Malfoy was pressing up against him and his mouth was on his throat and Harry didn't know what to do.

Well, he moaned, a little, and canted his hips up, and that wasn't the course of action he had been planning to take, at all.

Malfoy pressed against him and rubbed him through his pants. Harry

shivered. He panted. And hell yes, he was hard.

Because he was fucking sixteen, and at this age, almost anything felt good.

"Sex now," Malfoy demanded, impatient. "You can have your sexuality crisis later."

Malfoy's hands were everywhere – not graceful and experienced, but not clumsy, either. The same hands that hit him and wrapped around his throat and squeezed were touching him now in an entirely different way and it felt foreign yet familiar.

Harry debated pulling the Not Gay card, but this was a particularly difficult manoeuvre considering that he happened to be hard while Malfoy's mouth and hands were, coincidentally, on his body. Not that the two circumstances had anything to do with one another, but to a casual observer who didn't know any better, they just might.

Harry tried to think Unsexy Thoughts, which was kind of difficult when somebody was fondling your dick –albeit, through the fabric of your trousers. He cycled through his favourites, which had saved him time and time again in various classes: McGonagall in nothing but a string bikini. Argus Filch "petting" Mrs. Norris while he wore leathergear. A naked Professor Flitwick dancing the Lambada. Voldemort covered with body glitter but little else.

When he was still hard because Malfoy was stroking firmly and sucking on the point just below his ear, Harry forced himself to stop lest he start associating those horrifying images with sexy feelings and end up developing some sort of Complex or Fetish or something.

And speaking of Fetishes, Malfoy was apparently a pervert who got off on forcing himself on unsuspecting rivals/arch-enemies-cum (okay, bad turn of phrase) rivals-slash-arch-enemies-turned-not-quite-friends and making them question their previously unquestionable sexualities.

So this is what they meant by the Homosexual Agenda. Malfoy was a Recruiter. Not just for the Dark Side, but for the Gay Dark Side, which made him question all the symbolism with Snakes and Voldemort and oh god he really was going to develop some sort of scary Complex--

And he hoped that Malfoy, at least, was only into forcing his rivals into such uncomfortable positions. If he had slutted his way through Slytherin House –

Harry was assailed with a terrifying image of Crabbe and Goyle and nope, still hard, and GOD he had to stop doing this to himself.

He grasped Malfoy by his slim hips to push him away, those hips he had felt all sharp and bony under his hands before, those same hips that he had probably bruised on multiple occasions.

Malfoy wrapped one arm around him, pressing forward at the touch, mistaking it for encouragement – ha! He was crazy and delusional, to be sure. A hot wet mouth sucked at the juncture of neck and shoulder and teeth pressed into skin and if he kept that up, there'd be a mark – *bastard* – while his free hand climbed up, spiderlike, underneath Harry's jumper and stroked his nipple through the thin cotton fabric of his shirt.

Harry let out a manly squeak.

Malfoy kissed the line of his jaw. "Has anyone ever touched you like this before?" he asked, which wasn't quite a cheesy porn line but it was close so why did it make him shudder?

Because why ask the question when he fucking well knew the answer, obviously; it wasn't like Harry spent every day getting molested by Poufy Perverts, after all. He tried to snipe back with something to that extent but then Malfoy's hands were undoing his belt and his brain forgot how to use words.

Well, other than Oh. My. God.

Malfoy was expertly undoing his pants – he's had to have done this before, slut...but then again, it could be because he's used to undoing his own pants, duh – and his hands were skimming the skin of Harry's trembling stomach. A zipper hissed and then he was reaching and just *stroking* ever so lightly, two fingers running up and then down the length of his erection and he squeezed his eyes shut as things burst and Harry was coming, his entire body shaking with his sudden orgasm.

Panting, Harry slowly opened his eyes.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Malfoy was looking down between them with something akin to shock, paused in his movements. "...that's *it*?"

What the fuck, Malfoy. Harry wanted to shove him back but it was

hard to be properly righteously enraged when someone had his hand down your pants.

Malfoy carefully extracted his hand, staring at the liquid on it with disgust, sniffing it lightly before making a gagging face.

"I mean, hey..." He said, sounding a bit uncertain himself. "Maybe this experimentation thing isn't the grand old party it's cracked up to be."

Okay, that death thing? It would have been really really good right about now. Because he was sixteen, and at this age, these types of things happened. Harry tried to find his voice, but, more importantly, he tried to focus all his magic into making a hole open up beneath him on the floor. Or maybe he could get his wand and cast Obliviate on Malfoy, because this was the last rumour he wanted Malfoy to spread about him.

"Try new things, Draco. You only live once, Draco," Malfoy was saying, shaking his head. Not quite sure what to do with his dirty hand, he wiped it onto the fabric of Harry's shirt.

That was enough to jolt Harry back to the situation – at hand, so to speak. "Hey! What're you—"

"What? You made it!"

And that was enough to make Harry shut up with mortification, once again, his whole face flaming – as in blushing, of course.

"Right," Malfoy laughed, pulling back and straightening out his clothes. He shook his head and laughed again. "See you around, Potter."

Never ever had he hated Draco Malfoy more than that moment.

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-"You may love it when you get it home, but it doesn't always go with everything in the house."-

"Ron and Hermione are coming to visit," Harry says. "Behave yourself, now." There is a stern tone in his voice, and this is the same way he would have spoken to the old Draco, the one he had to remind to not insult his friends and to be civil.

"'ll be good, H-Harry," Draco promises.

He would give anything just to hex him for calling Hermione a "Mudblood."

Hermione and Ron had called for days and days – mostly Hermione, but sometimes Ron, too, because Ron loved to practise his skills with the telephone. They had insisted on seeing Draco, and although Harry doesn't want to show him to anybody, these are his friends and it's important that they know what's going on in his life.

It's become very important since the war, their relationship layered with guilt on top of separation on top of guilt, that maybe Harry wouldn't be like this if they had paid more attention that year, that he wouldn't be like this if they weren't married with a daughter and could see him more.

Harry thinks that he wouldn't be like this if a lot of things hadn't happened, but none of that could be helped, now.

When they arrive at his house, Harry takes their coats. Draco hides behind Harry, peering out at them as if they were strangers. In a way, they are. It was the same way that he had clung to Harry when Hermione had first come. Harry doesn't encourage it, but he takes care to shield him, with his body.

Ron compliments his taste in furniture.

"That's a nice lamp, Harry."

"Oh, yeah...I got it on clearance."

Hermione tries to be sweet and caring, but she's more forward than anything else.

"He's looking very good, Harry," she smiles, and Harry nods, a bit

eagerly, he thinks. He wants her to see how well Malfoy's doing, wants her to say how much better it is now that he's in Harry's care.

Pale, unsure fingers seek out his hand, lightly chilled and soft, and Harry grips them tightly, squeezing back in a comforting way. Then he notices Hermione looking at them, at the way Draco's hand clings to his, the way his whole body seems to cling to Harry's side, and Harry wants to shake him off, suddenly.

"He's doing very well," Harry says, stiffly.

"This is a very nice rug, Harry," Ron says.

"Thanks," says Harry. "It came with the house. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah," says Ron. "Right."

He looks around, running his hands over the furniture and the wallpaper.

"I love these curtains," Ron says.

"They don't match the carpet," Harry says.

Together they sit down at the table for dinner.

Harry thinks Ron has never fully adjusted to the reality of his relationship with Draco. By the time that he had learned of it, they had been in the midst of the war, and it was no longer relevant. After the war, Harry had dated his sister, and while Ron had to have known that he visited Draco at St. Mungo's – if from nothing but hearing Ginny complain about it – he probably always imagined Harry in that kissing-and-holding-hands-with-Ginny-and-going-to-be-a-part-of-the-family way.

"So," Ron says conversationally, "remember that time you were a ferret?"

Harry frowns.

Hermione kicks him under the table.

"Ow!" Ron says. He tries again. "I mean, remember how Harry used to kick your arse all the time?"

Draco looks worried and confused at the questions.

Harry reaches under the table for his hand and squeezes it, reassuringly. Draco beams at him, a sunny, beautiful smile.

Then Hermione looks confused and worried.

Dinner continues in the same vein. Ron asks, "Remember how you used to cheat at Quidditch?" and Draco has to ask, his voice wavering, "What's Qu-quidditch?" Harry is only grateful that Ron does not ask, "Remember how you became a Death Eater?"

"He's completely out of his mind," Ron says, out of the side of his mouth to Hermione.

"Ron!" Hermione reprimands, the way Harry expects her to, but he can see the horror in her eyes when she looks at Draco. And what right does she have, to look at him, like that?

Just because he doesn't remember their past doesn't make him any less of a person, just because he is a different person doesn't mean he is a bad one.

He's probably an even better one, now.

"Crazy as bedbugs," Ron says, and Draco repeats it, later, when they are gone.

"Crazy as," he says. "As bedbugs. Bedbugs."

"Stop," Harry says. "Stop it. Just stop it."

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-"Sex isn't the answer. Sex is the question. (The answer is yes.)"-

For days Harry wandered around feeling suicidal. He lost interest in mealtimes (and in carrots, and bananas, and asparagus and corn on the cob and certain types of bread).

Sleeping was dangerous because even if he had a wet dream, he'd wonder if he had climaxed too soon.

What was worse was that the more he avoided Malfoy, the more the Slytherin sought him out.

With what had happened between them, Malfoy had more ammunition to taunt him with than ever.

All Malfoy needed to do was say, "That's it?"

And Harry would a.) blush, b.) stammer, c.) run away or d.) all of the above.

It was a multiple choice question that was negative points no matter how he answered.

Who knew two little words could hold so much power? It was almost like the Killing Curse, the way it never failed to cut Harry down. Malfoy, of course, prick that he was, utilised this to the best of his ability.

Crabbe and Goyle always stared at their leader with an even more dumbfounded sense of awe, as if he had acquired new and great and mysteeerious (wiggle your fingers when you say this) powers overnight, the ability to render Potter completely useless with two tiny words. Pansy looked at him, tittering and adoring and hanging off his arm and Harry hated him, hated him, wanted to pound him into the ground.

Not like that! Not like that!

Ron would have asked him why that Malfoy just saying "That's it" in the hallway left him a wreck on the way to class – if Ron hadn't been so attached to Lavender. Hermione would have worried more about him, he was sure, but mostly she said, "Disgusting, isn't it?" every time that couple did their octopus impressions for the world to see.

That particular affair continued to be very awkward and very public. They spent a lot of time sitting around, practising eating each other's faces. Hermione didn't date but Ron needled her about the excessive letters that she wrote to Krum, and they fought a lot.

Harry hated it, and resisted the urge to scream sometimes, 'Mummy, Daddy, stop fighting!'

"I don't want to do this in front of Harry," Hermione would hiss at Ron.

"Harry knows what's going on!" Ron would say. "I don't even know why you're so upset all the time, maybe if you actually got *laid* by your precious Viktorrr—"

Hermione had slapped him, of course.

People were having sex all over, Harry was sure. They were teenagers, and that was just what they did. Merlin knew Ginny had a reputation as a little spitfire, no matter how Ron put his hands over his ears and went, "la la la not listening, not listening!" whenever the boys brought her name up in conversation. Seamus was experimenting with something called polyamoury, he said, and it was working out fantastic, just bloody fantastic.

"I'm not a player," Seamus said, quite seriously. "I just crush a lot."

And nobody, Harry was sure, had that same embarrassing problem that he did.

For a week the torture went on; Harry couldn't even punch him to punish him for it, terrified of the images that conjured, the two of them rolling about together, their bodies pressed hotly together, sweat slicking their skin.

It was possible that this sort of thing had been going on all along. Why didn't anybody tell him that fighting did that to you? He'd ask Hermione about but the idea of her coming up to him with *A History of Sexuality* in her hands and possibly *pamphlets* was another nightmarish vision.

And so Harry endured, as he was meant to do. Harry endured and endured and endured until he could endure no more, and, in true Gryffindor fashion, he went after the crux of the problem.

He pulled out the Marauder's Map and sought Malfoy out.

He didn't know what he planned to do, exactly, actually, but he had wanted to prove something, and he figured that he'd stop running away, because that was for cowards, and face the problem head-on...er, so to speak.

He assaulted Malfoy the same way that he'd been assaulted, grabbing him and pulling him into a broom closet, spelling the door shut and locked behind him. It was easier in the dark, when he didn't have to see Malfoy's face, and could concentrate on the feel of his body and ignore the mop against his own back. He could feel his body heat, his skin, could imagine flesh and bone where they pressed together. There was something to be said about being in the dark.

"Nice choice of location," Malfoy said, his voice coloured in tones of deep amusement. "This isn't an obvious metaphor at all."

"Shut up," Harry growled, and feeling much the same way that he did when he had to hit Malfoy and hurt him, he fisted his hands in Malfoy's robes, yanked him forward, and kissed him.

At least, that had been the intention.

What had actually ended up happening was that he mashed into Malfoy's nose. There was something to be said about being in the dark.

Malfoy first said, "Ow" and then he laughed, and Harry felt that warm rush of *God I hate him* wash over him and so both hands found his face and guided their mouths together and then Malfoy shut up.

Harry had never kissed anybody other than Cho Chang, and that had been awkward and uncomfortable, shy and hesitant. It was nothing like that with Malfoy, although it was still a little awkward and uncomfortable there was nothing shy about this kiss, the way their mouths aligned and teeth knocked into his lip and Malfoy grabbed him closer. Privately Harry thought that he was rather a rotten kisser but then robes were being shoved off and his hands found the smooth skin of his back and Harry decided that this was tolerable.

In a way it felt the way he always knew his body would feel. Somehow, in the last month or so, he had learned Malfoy's body, the way it would purple and bruise. Now he was learning to touch him in an entirely different way, but he was still touching him, all the same.

He was surprised Malfoy wasn't putting up much of a fuss, considering the grossness of doing this inside a broom closet, of all places, the dust

smudging into his hair and clothes and on his skin. He liked the idea that he was dirtying him – no one had that right to be so despicable and look so pristine, always –and he smiled against Malfoy's skin, thinking about how upset he would be when this was all over and then he bit down.

Harry wasn't good at being seductive, but he was hard and there was skin and a willing body against him. Malfoy let out a small moan as he brushed against him – not entirely intentionally, mind you, considering the smallness of the closet- and then Harry shivered.

And then suddenly it was easy.

The details of it were shockingly clear. Things he didn't note when it happened would appear to him afterwards, the fineness of each silken strand of hair, the pale shell of his ear. He would remember the way his skin tasted, just on the tip of his tongue.

Malfoy's mouth on his mouth, on his neck and on his throat and then Malfoy's slim, pale, long-fingered hand was stroking his stomach and sliding down and *God*, couldn't have a repeat incident, so Harry mirrored his action instead, reaching out and in and stroking him firmly, listening to him moan and *ha!* No way that he was going to lose it before the blonde, this time.

It was like every other aspect of their lives up until this moment; Harry didn't have to beat himself, all he had to do was beat Malfoy, and there was a horrible pun here that he was certainly *not* going to make.

The position was awkward, his wrist hurt but it was worth it, his hand closing around a column of flesh as warm and hard as his own; the angle was different, but the directions were pretty self-explanatory.

(That was the good thing about penises, they were pretty much self-explanatory. He had seen vaginas in the dirty magazines Seamus had and sometimes passed around and had often wondered, where's the instruction manual for this thing?)

It was hard to concentrate when Malfoy was doing the same to him, stroking and squeezing on his hot, hard flesh, because the technique was different and it felt so good – no way should it feel so good, but it did – and he bit into a pale shoulder to muffle his sounds and when he came, he bit down hard, with Malfoy shuddering and gasping beneath him.

And then it was over.

And then it was time for the post-heated rival sex awkwardness.

Pre-orgasm, everything was bloody fantastic; it all felt great and there was nothing to do but feel and chase that hot, perfect climax.

Now Harry realised that he was in a broom closet, of all things, surrounded by brooms and mops and cleaning solutions and likely sentient dust bunnies, with Draco Malfoy, of all people, and – oh my god – his hand was coated with sperm.

He was about to freak out about it before Malfoy cast *Scourgify* and things were okay again.

"We probably shouldn't do this again. Ever."

"Really, Potter, don't you think that that's being a bit melodramatic?" Malfoy's lips quirked, irritatingly. "It was only a little handjob, after all."

Harry was about to argue that there was nothing little about it.

"I mean..."

"I wouldn't say never again," Malfoy said, picking his robes up off of the dusty floor. "But maybe someplace a bit more sanitary, next time. As much as I appreciate the irony."

"Never again," Harry emphasised, and then Malfoy shrugged and said, "Okay," and Harry wanted to grab him and kiss him, hard, just to punish him for agreeing so easily.

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-"It's so easy to love somebody, I tell you, when there's nothing else around."-

Harry had dated Ginny for a while, after the war. He thought that they made an honest go of it. He had liked girls before Draco, after all, it wasn't that he was gay or anything, and Ginny had grown up beautiful, fit with vibrant red hair. They did everything that a normal couple was supposed to do: dinners and picnics, shopping and even Muggle movies. Ginny loved action flicks over romantic comedies, and Harry loved that about her.

She had always loved him, she admitted to him on their second date, even before she knew him. Clearly she meant this as a sign that they were Meant to Be.

When they made love, Harry came, and so did she. For him it was a satisfactory orgasm, and he had little to no complaints about it. Afterwards he rolled over and went to sleep, and sometimes he even held her. He tried to make himself think about her when he slept with her, for the most part, he succeeded.

From time to time she asked Harry to fuck her, but somehow, it wasn't quite the same. Perhaps it was the tone of the request, the level of vulgarity. It wasn't that he didn't like dirty talk, and he wondered if maybe she had instead asked to be ridden like his Firebolt, he would have responded better.

He could have been very happy with Ginny. They would have gotten married, raised a handful of children, sent them off to Hogwarts. They would have been just like his own mum and dad. Everything come full circle, except hopefully without the Rise of the Dark Lord part.

During the time that they were together, he hardly saw Draco at all. Ginny didn't like it, she said it depressed him and that, in turn, depressed her. He needed to let go of the past, she said. He needed to move on, look forward to the future. (See: Learning to Let Go[After the War], Chapter 3.)

"All those crazy people," she had shuddered, "I don't know how you can stand it, Harry."

He couldn't, but he wasn't about to tell her that, not with the way she had looked, like spiders and sour milk.

"I know...you still...care about Malfoy," she had said, slowly. "But there's nothing you can do for him, Harry, you've already tried your best."

And then she had hugged him and kissed him to remind him to count his blessings.

For a while he let himself believe it.

He didn't go to visit Draco because it upset Ginny. He held her hand and together they walked through parks together, and she settled against him and sighed, content, her breath warm and sweet when it caressed his cheek. He picked a fallen dry leaf out of her hair and crushed it between his fingers. It wasn't like how it was with Draco back at school, but then again, nothing was like that; when he kissed her he kissed her differently, their mouths soft and moulded together. He didn't get hard at just closing his eyes and seeing her face, but then again he never wanted to kill her, either, so perhaps it was an even exchange.

"I'll never look at it the same way again. It was hard, those days, remember that time the supplies didn't arrive, and we built a big fire..." Harry begins, remembering the way that they had all held together, the way that they had all held each other. They had torn down the furniture in order to build the fire, breaking chairs and tables and then using the legs of chairs and tables to break more things and the light had flickered off of their faces. They were warm inside even when they were so hungry, so cold.

"No, I don't remember," Ginny said. Her voice was both sour and crisp, like biting into an unripe apple. Harry didn't bring up war things after that.

She did the same when he mentioned Fred and George or Hogwarts. And he could forget about ever saying Draco's name, that was as good as saying Voldemort Back in The Day.

And, right, she didn't like him to say Voldemort, either.

For the most part they were happy. She had been living at the Burrow when they began seeing each other; Molly couldn't let any of her babies go since what happened to Fred, but Ginny yearned for a place of her own. She didn't like to stay overnight at 12 Grimmauld Place too much, since it had served as one of their bases during the war. After only two months of dating they signed a lease together and moved into a cosy flat in downtown London.

Ron was delighted, of course. Hermione told him congratulations and hugged him tight; said that Ginny would be good for him, she was so vivacious. Harry tended to think that perhaps Hermione just had a redhead fetish.

But they were right about one thing at least. People seemed to breathe better when he was part of a couple, instead of that lonely, angsty war hero that he supposed they thought would snap one day and kill them all. With a girl on his arm he was magically stable, as if estrogen was just what he needed to balance out his crazy testosterone-based killing need. He was part of a normal, happy couple, with a pocketful of dreams and hopes.

Every day when Harry woke up next to her, he prayed that he would wake up in love.

Of course he didn't know what love was – no one would call that thing he had had with Malfoy love, it was mostly pain and hurting, inexpert fumblings and lusting and the need to pretend that there wasn't a war approaching that they would both have to fight.

When he looked at Ginny he felt tender, in that soft wonderful way and in that strange sore way as well. He knew she didn't need protecting but he had wanted to protect her, keep her sweet and safe.

They spent dinners together with quiet conversations, questions about work and colleagues, family news and then sometimes silence. Comfortable silence, Harry forced himself to think, no matter how much of an oxymoron it seemed.

In their flat there was a tree that was too close to the window, that needed trimming, but neither of them had gotten around to it yet. On windy days, it scratched and scratched and scratched, like something trying to get in.

Mostly it was good. Ginny didn't like the theatre but sometimes she got tickets to Quidditch games for them. She and Harry always cheered for the same teams, and on particularly cold or windy days, he would watch with one arm around her and one arm waving a banner.

She introduced him to her friends; she was very popular, and she had many of them. Harry didn't always feel so comfortable around so many girls – he never had, but he obliged Ginny, because he wanted it to work.

"Hi, Sarah," Harry would say, smiling.

"My name's Marissa," Marissa said.

It was kind of like that, a lot of the time. But you had to give Harry points for trying, at least.

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-"Delay is the deadliest form of denial."-

It would not happen again. It could not happen again.

Harry made a lot of resolutions that he absolutely intended to keep. He also resolved to stop looking at Malfoy, because that had gotten weird.

Apparently, once you've done...things...with a person, it's hard to look at them the same way again, even when clothed. He couldn't watch him talk without remembering what it was like to kiss him, couldn't hear his voice without recalling the sound of his moans. When he wanked in the shower he couldn't help placing both a name and face to the touches on his own body, and when he squeezed himself and pumped into his own fist he had very specific images that brought him to orgasm. But Harry figured that he was just lonely.

Sex changed everything, if that was even what had happened between them.

Harry wasn't even sure if it had, well, *counted*. After all, most of the time sex involved putting one thing in the other, didn't it, and none of that had gone on at all.

How did everyone else around him manage it? How did they go about and brag about their conquests and not feel like a Basilisk had taken up permanent residence in the pit of their stomachs, occasionally leaving to go about exploring in the pipes of their intestines?

Then again, none of them were doing anything that was out-of-the-ordinary (although Seamus was "flexible in many ways," supposedly). And none of them was doing anything with *Malfoy* – whom, by now Harry had decided, was the root of all evil.

Not looking at Malfoy, of course, led to a great many inconveniences. Not looking at him in the hallways caused Harry to walk into people when he purposefully looked the other way, not looking at him in Potions class caused him to break things or miss what Snape was saying, and not looking at him in Quidditch – well, that was just impossible, but Harry forced himself to concentrate on catching the Snitch instead, and of course Gryffindor won.

It was in the Quidditch change rooms afterwards that there was trouble. Harry had heard enough about Seamus's one issue of Wet and

Wicked Wizardry (he did not look, thank-you-very-much) to find the setting highly suspect.

It wasn't like he wanted to stay behind.

There were all sorts of issues, however, that he had to deal with. Quidditch Captain duties and responsibilities, equipment that had to be put away, the fact that two of the showers were currently broken (for one the water was either too hot or too cold, and the second spit water on you rather than spraying) – it amounted to a healthy amount of time delay in which Harry was left as the only one in the room.

He hadn't wanted to stay behind at all, the same way he really hadn't meant to initiate things with Malfoy, that last time, but sometimes things just worked out that way.
Under the spray of the warm water he shivered; he closed his eyes and thought again about what had happened, hardly daring to believe that it had actually happened – not just once, but twice. He felt a twitch of arousal as he did and wilfully tried to fight it back - wanking in empty change rooms was practically *begging* for it.

By the time he finished washing the soap off his body, carefully avoiding that area, he was fully hard. And still, nobody had come to initiate anything with him.

Harry exhaled through his nose in a sigh of –relief? Yes, it was relief. He finished his shower, towelled, and got dressed, all the while watching the door for any intruders, particularly those bearing Slytherin colours, here to torment him after losing their match. As he finally pulled his jumper back on, his hair tousled and wet, he concluded that no one, in fact, was coming (in any sense of the word – and he hated himself for thinking like that, but he was sixteen, and normal sixteen-year-olds thought about sex every six seconds, he just happened to have more issues than most sixteen-year-olds).

Feeling distinctly satisfied, and not at all put off, Harry went back to the dorms, to perhaps recline in the privacy of his own bed, concentrating on not thinking on what didn't happen at all.

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-"The idea, you know, is that the sentimental person thinks things will last – the romantic person has a desperate confidence that they won't."-

"You're angry again, aren't you?" Ginny demanded, and even though her red hair was alight in flames, and she looked powerful and mesmerizing and beautiful, he didn't want to look at her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, his shoulders slumping. He slipped his hands into his pockets, so that he could curl his fists around whatever he found in there – a handful of change, an old receipt, for example.

"What are you angry about, Harry?!" her voice broke when she got angry, hoarse and loud and it annoyed him.

"Nothing," Harry said, although 'everything' was on the tip of his tongue. I'm angry about your dead brother. I'm angry about the broken window. I'm angry about my ex-lover. I'm angry about that spill on the carpet. I'm angry that you didn't do the laundry, that I can't find the marmalade, that I broke a dish the other day, I'm angry I didn't get to kill that man again and again and again.

Angry about the mob of people in town. Angry that the Tube was too crowded. Angry at himself. Angry about breakfast.

Talking upset her. Even mentioning old places was taboo. Harry grit his teeth and settled for twisting the towel around in his hands. On the stove, the kettle came to a boil and the steam made it whistle, a sound not unlike a small, high-pitched scream.

The less they talked, the more Harry's mind wandered, and when his mind wandered, eventually, his body did, too.

He drifted; Ginny sensed him drifting, the way that all women can, the same instinct that makes them want to get pregnant and knit sweaters. Ginny wasn't much of a knitter, but she made a bungled attempt at it, one of those things that Mrs. Weasley had taught her to prepare her for a life of domesticity. She would gift him with scarves that were bright but too short or too long, sweaters that were baggy with uneven sleeves, as if she could somehow knit him back into her life and keep him close, with skein upon skein of coloured yarn.

Mrs. Weasley, hungry for grandchildren, eyed them brightly whenever

they came to visit, and Harry always had to watch Ginny's tea in case she slipped in a Fertility Potion.

It wasn't that he didn't want children; he did, desperately, he did. Ginny always said that he'd be a wonderful father, curled up against him on the couch, tendrils of red hair brushing against his cheek and neck. He rubbed her flat belly, then, as if caressing the child already growing inside her.

It terrified him, too. He had never known his own father, and frankly, he didn't think an ex-convict and fugitive from the law and a wizened old wizard bent on changing the world were exactly the best to model himself after. He could dote on his son or daughter or whoever, though, and take care of them and protect them from the sharp corners of the world. And he would never expect them to save it.

He wanted children. He loved Ginny too much to use her for them.

Harry loved Ginny, this was true. He loved her and he loved her family, and they were great friends, and they had okay sex together. He never wanted to hit her or hurt her, so surely that was what being in love was like.

Only there was that one day Harry wanted to go someplace where he could speak his mind, where his audience always wanted to listen, even if it could not always talk. When he came home he was a considerable bit more depressed but a bit happier too – he wasn't quite sure how that worked, but Ginny saw it, in his face – that slight, sad quirk of his lips when he hung his coat at the door.

He hadn't been in months; Draco had been especially warm from missing him. He still felt warm from it, despite the windy, chilly day, even though his skin felt numb at that first moment of contact from walking into a too-warm room.

"You went to St. Mungo's, didn't you?"

Her voice was quiet, not so much angry. Harry made an equally quiet, noncommittal sound.

"Why do you still see him?" she had asked. "You do know it's hopeless, right?"

She was hopeless. Just because the situation was hopeless didn't mean

that there wasn't hope; there was always hope, Harry thought.

And then, finally getting a bit angry: "You have no obligation to him! As I recall, he betrayed you!"

Harry couldn't find the words and, used to keeping things quiet when Ginny didn't want to hear them, simply shrugged.

"That's it, we're through," she said, next, and then he was chucked, just like that. He supposed that a man in his state should have turned to drink. He should have stayed home and felt depressed over it, perhaps eaten a lonely meal for one and sighed a lot. Instead he went for a walk and found himself taking the tube to St. Mungo's.

Draco always welcomed him back, no matter how long he had been gone. Perhaps time passed differently for him, and the days didn't matter, one of them blurring into the next. Harry didn't want to think about the possibility where time passed slowly, and it all seemed like one neverending day. Maybe, for Draco, the days where nothing happened, he didn't really remember or process. That was a much better alternative.

Draco needed him in a way that Ginny didn't. Ginny needed him in her own ways, of course, but her type of needing made Harry feel woven in: a house a job some kids a pretty little wife a happy life.

He didn't know where he was in all those yarns and threads, didn't know if those were enough to tie the loose ends of him together.

Two months after their breakup it was December again, already. Ron invited him to the Weasley family holiday party; nothing depressed Ron and Hermione more than letting him spend Christmas alone. He was afraid that it would be awkward, Ron assured him that it would be okay.

"After all," Ron said, "you'll always be a part of the family."

Ginny had been wearing a dark green dress; she looked stunning in contrast with it. Ron and Mrs. Weasley smiled at each other; Harry thought they were dirty schemers.

Drunk on eggnog he jokingly kissed Ginny under the mistletoe, candles and homelife glowing golden around them. She wrapped her arms around him, and folded him in.

"Why did we ever break up?" she asked, softly, pretty red mouth pressed against his ear.

Harry smiled down at her. "I don't even know," he said, and amongst the presents and the food and the firelight and the laughing they decided to get back together.

It went well for a couple of months before Harry thought that surely Draco missed him an unbearable amount, and so he went for a visit – just one little visit couldn't hurt.
Draco wrapped his arms around him, tight, smiled and beamed and struggled with his words to try and express himself. Harry touched his face softly to show that he understood.

The nurse, the pretty one, Amanda, smiled over at them. "It's nice that he opens up to you so well. He's always so happy to see you."

And in that moment, Harry thought that he could do the impossible. His entire life, he had always been expected to do the impossible, after all. He could take him home and heal him. He could save him.

He could make him better, bring him back to his old self – even though that old self was like a rash, irritating to all. He'd probably annoy all of Harry's friends and they'd hate him for it, because Malfoy really was more compliant and pleasant this way, but they could probably at least be happy that Harry was happy.

He didn't lie about it when he came home; he told Ginny exactly where he had been and what the nurse had said. He had smiled at her –because she loved him, so she should be happy that he was happy. It was a risky move; she was holding a kitchen knife at the time, after all. But then she simply smiled, her knife slicing a banana, and then an apple, cutting them, perfectly and evenly, her knife making sharp sounds against the cutting board. She said, "Well, isn't that nice."

They fought about things other than Draco, of course. Most of the time they didn't fight at all, and it festered between them.

They broke up in fits. Harry went back to visiting Draco at St. Mungo's. Two months later he would run into Ginny, and she would smile at him, softly, sadly, and say how she had missed him. Harry looked at the sunlight on her fiery red hair and her big brown eyes and he saw a future with her and her family. He told her that he

missed her, too, and ended up staying the night at her place and they went out again after that.

Only to break up again several months later.

There were stretches that lasted longer than others. One stretch lasted eight months. There were periods of break up that were longer than others, too, and Harry saw Draco more in the downtime between relationships.

When Hermione got pregnant, everybody asked when it was going to be their turn.

As their remaining adult friends started getting married as well, Ginny would sigh when it came time to buy new dresses.

Their school friends were all either dead or getting married. Harry didn't know where he fit in all that.

The last break up was not particularly bad, no particularly violent. In fact, it had been forgettable in many ways. It felt like watching a re-run, like he had seen it all before and remembered the ending, even if he only had a vague feel for the plot that led it there.

And Draco was there, and Draco was wonderful and understanding and oh so happy to see him. Draco didn't expect anything of him, didn't demand that he commit, he was happy with what he could get.

Harry visited him much more often than usual, then, and finally he couldn't take the hospital anymore but he didn't want the seeing-Draco part to stop.

And so he took him home.

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-"To be good is to be in harmony with one's self. Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others."-

Harry was in a bad mood; Lavender suggested cheerily to Ron that he had gotten off on the wrong side of the bed that morning and he decided that Hermione was right, she really was just a stupid, air-headed bint and Ron was probably just with her because he was horny, which was not a legitimate reason to be with a person at all, in theory.

"It's gotten *up*," Harry had corrected, irritably. And which side was the "wrong" side of the bed, anyway? He had been in such a state for several days, as well, and had gotten up from both sides of the bed, so maybe his bed was all wrong.

He was full with things he could not let escape from his mouth, everything was fucked up and wrong and what was even more fucked up was that he thought he was beginning to want...no, he wasn't even going to go there.

There was no way he could tell Ron. In a moment of weakness he had almost broken down and told Hermione, but he had not even spoken to her about Sirius; she looked up from her Charms essay, lovely, intelligent, kind, and the moment was gone.

"Is something the matter, Harry?"

"What? No. Not at all. What makes you say that? Everything's fine."

He had not gone to see Dumbledore this year as he had sought his advice in previous years; fifth year had torn a ragged, gaping hole in their relationship and whatever outreaches of comfort he offered Harry didn't want them now. He didn't want platitudes about Sirius's death, he didn't want further reminders of how many more would die in the coming war, he didn't want to be made to feel better. To get over him so soon, even though he'd had him for such a short period of time, seemed a disgrace to the man his parents had loved, that he had loved. It would seem like he didn't love him enough, unfair to Sirius, who had spent twelve years in prison branded as a traitor, with no one to love him at all.

Never mind the fact that he would never dream of going to *Dumbledore* with something like *this*.

He'd either develop a Complex or never be able to think about sex ever again, as if his ego weren't already fragile enough from his, er, "shortcomings" – he really didn't need impotent as a word to associate with himself as well.

Malfoy was, of course, the source of his troubles, the wound that wouldn't heal, the unscratchable itch, the incurable plague.

Malfoy was absolutely irritating and Harry wanted to bite him.

He needed to stop thinking about him, about It, he needed to move on with his life. He wanted to punch the wall until his arm ached, until his knuckles were raw. He wanted to punch Malfoy and he didn't care if Malfoy had given up on his masochistic urges to fight, he didn't care about the consequences anymore.

It was in detention that it happened – their first alone together for months and Malfoy was *looking* at him, with both arms rolled up to his sleeves (the skin of his left arm bare and pale and perfect as snow, as an alabaster column) and Harry didn't know what to do with himself so he shoved him.

"Potter, what the hell—"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," Harry said, and he grabbed him, not caring if he hurt him, because hurting Malfoy was nothing new. He pulled him against his body and he did bite, just as nastily as Malfoy had ever bitten him.

"Again," Malfoy gasped, "now." Demanding as always, of course, spoiled brat and prick and little prince and all the derogatory words Harry could come up with, off the top of his head.

He thrust his hips up and shuddered, and Harry hissed, letting the breath out slowly between his teeth.

Snape could come back any moment – was that door even locked? A thrill of unexpected excitement; a susurration up and down his spine. Well, then, they just had to be quick about it, and that made Harry's hands clawed at Malfoy's jumper, tugging and urging it off, then the button-up shirt, next, revealing all smooth white skin and lean musculature.

"What do you think?" Malfoy said, arching a brow, with all the confidence of someone who knows exactly what they look like. Sinuous, brazen, unashamed. He took a shaky breath.

"I think we can't do this," Harry said. A horrible lie, of course, because weren't they, in a way, already doing "this"?

Malfoy scowled, shoving Harry away. "Fuck you, Potter. You're so fucked up I could make a list and I wouldn't even know where to begin." Harry could see the goosebumps forming on his arms, the fine, almost-invisible hairs raised.

He reached for his discarded shirt and began pulling it back on.

"I'm an amazing lover," Malfoy said, arrogantly, yes, but also quickly. "You don't know what you're missing."

"Well, with an argument like that, how could I refuse...?" Harry responded, a little breathlessly. And the surprise on his pale face, his mouth dropping slightly open so that Harry could see how red and wet it was inside, that was worth it.

"Fuck you," Malfoy spat. "You think that I actually want this? You're nothing but a convenience to me, and you've stopped becoming convenient."

And then Harry pulled him close and kissed him, holding him still even as he struggled against him, prepared for the resistance; he thrust his tongue into his mouth and pressed him back against the table, hard enough to bruise, he was sure, rubbing his clothed erection against the blonde's. He dug his fingers into his skin, kissed him until the weak struggling stopped and Malfoy opened his mouth to him, until he felt like he had swallowed all his breath and then kissed some more.

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-"I drank to drown my pain, but the damned pain learned how to swim..."-

It probably wasn't the smartest of ideas.

Harry had gone out for necessities and not-so-necessities (puddings) when he had run into a few colleagues from work. They were heading to a bar, they said, and he just had to join them. They weren't taking no for an answer – apparently, it had been a friend's birthday party, and they had promised to deliver Harry Potter.

Harry had ordered a few glasses of Firewhiskey, miserable that he wasn't at home and in bed with Draco, feeling frustrated that it would be in incredibly poor taste to go into the bathroom and wank. He spoke when he was spoken to, and then after they cut the cake, he excused himself and headed home.

Just a couple of glasses of Firewhiskey, abhorring the burn in his throat but welcoming the warm feeling in his stomach. Just enough. Enough poison in his bloodstream to render him absolutely dangerous.

It was an astoundingly bad idea. It is an astoundingly bad idea. Still, when Draco meets him at the door and mumbles "I missed you" into his shirt, Harry doesn't know how to do anything else.

Harry's body is warm, and he feels blurred by alcohol. Draco is so warm, solid and real in his arms. And he's his, and he's not going to leave him.

In the darkness of the hallway, he pulls him closer. And then he kisses him, for the first time in forever, for the first time since it's all happened, a kiss that's tender and aching, soft at first, wet.

Draco seems to respond by instinct – does he remember? The blonde kisses back in a way that's a bit shy but so different, not horrible and aggressive the way he used to. Harry likes it. Does he remember how to kiss Harry the way he likes to be kissed?

Draco can probably taste the alcohol on his tongue, but he doesn't shy away from it so Harry doesn't care.

"I missed you, too," Harry says. "God, I missed you."

In the dark, he doesn't have to look at his expression and for that he is

thankful.

He pushes him against the wall and kisses him again, and again and again, his breath coming heavy and hotter which each kiss. He crushes the slighter, slender body to him and Draco doesn't resist, not at all, not at all.

Well, not much, anyway.

If he resists, it's just like in the beginning, isn't it? The way they were, how it all used to be, only it's the present, and the past is now. He guides him into the living room, sitting down on the couch. There's a creaky spring that squeaks a protest when he bounces a little. His insides feel like they're trembling, like they want to vibrate out of his body.

"Do you know what will make me happy, Draco? I'd be happy if you touched me here," Harry pulls Draco's hand to his crotch, against the erection straining beneath it.

He's had a little too much to drink and the room feels warm and fuzzy, the press of Draco's hand against his erection too hot. Draco looks at him, those damn pale grey eyes questioning, and Harry encourages the touch, smiling as he rubs himself against the outstretched hand.

"Go on," Harry says softly, encouragingly, as if afraid to shatter a trance. It won't bite, he hears Malfoy's voice say in his ear.

Shy, questing fingers trace the outline of it. Harry hisses and grits his teeth; it has been far, far too long if even that light touch makes him feel as if he might explode. Draco pets him the way he might pet a cat, stroking over the length of it, rubbing it in one direction, over and over again.

"Perfect," Harry hisses.

He fumbles his trousers open, drunken fingers clumsy so it takes a while to undo his belt. The hiss of a zipper and he feels like someone's unzipping his body, pulling out his guts. He takes a trembling breath and presses a quick kiss to Draco's soft but unresponsive mouth.

"H-harry?"

Talking should ruin the fantasy. But he's so hot for him, so needy after so long that it doesn't. Of course, the alcohol helps, helps him concentrate on how much he needs instead of all the reasons why he

can't.

"Shh, shh, it's okay, Draco," Harry soothes, pulling that hand back to his eager, leaking prick. He rubs himself a little against the open palm, slicking it with clear liquid.

"Just touching, remember?" he says, as the touches come soft and hesitant, learning the feel of him, long fingers curious and exploring.

Their fingers interlaced, pale white skin against his own darker tone, he uses that pale hand to stroke himself, up and down and up and down.

"S-see?" he pants softly. "It's easy, Draco, you remember, don't you?"

And then he leans in for a kiss.

This one is open and a bit more forceful, he's pushing his tongue inside as if trying to seek him out.

Draco makes a noise but with as Harry has one hand cupping his cheek and the side of his jaw, fingers splayed and in control, he can't pull back.

Watching their hands entwined on his cock, watching Draco's face, so attentive and caring, he doesn't last long. He thrusts into the warm tunnel of flesh created by their hands, pressing kisses to Draco's skin.

All too soon, he's coming, spurting out white and hot on himself and on Draco's hand.

Draco pulls his hand away and holds it up to his face, sniffs a little and makes a face of disgust.

Harry laughs. "Yeah, you always thought it was kind of gross back then, too."

Back when he was younger. Or older, actually, since he now he is so much younger, really. It hurts his already-dizzy head to think too much about it, how they've gone forward but backwards in time, and so he doesn't. He pulls Draco a bit closer and kisses him again, holding him tightly until he coaxes a response.

"This'll feel good, I promise," Harry says softly, and he's looking into limpid grey eyes that are full of nothing but absolute trust as he reaches out and then he's cupping Draco through the crotch of his

pants. Draco looks confused – an expression that is completely foreign to Harry - so instead he superimposes it with the intense look of desire that he used to give him, and he knows, he knows, that after a few touches, the blonde would be hot and wanting.

He's soft, right now, when Harry opens his trousers, but that's not much of an issue. Kissing his throat he fondles him, and with a small whimper Draco shudders and his erection slowly takes shape in his hand.

When the long, slender legs spread for him, instinctively, he knows that he's won. "It's nice, isn't it?" he whispers, kissing the pink shell of an ear, a few silver strands of hair.

Draco doesn't answer in words, but rather in sounds. Soft, beautiful sounds, torn from him almost involuntarily, because the body remembers, his flesh remembers this touch, even if his mind supposedly doesn't. The skin, the muscles, the nerve endings – they all have memories of their own and when he shudders and bucks up it is in the exact right way.

Harry touches Draco reverently, still unable to believe that he has the feel of that skin and that warmth after so long. For two terrifying months he had believed him dead, and for two horrible years he had wished he was. Harry supposed that he was stupid that way.

He works him with his hand while watching his expressions, watching his brows knit together and his mouth drop open, wet and red. He leans and kisses him while he strokes him, pushing his tongue into his mouth and filling him up with it while he increases the pressure on his cock, thumb spreading the wetness around the tip and Draco whimpers at the feel of it.

Draco had to be touched gently, handled with care. He's not that fragile, Harry knows this from experience, but he can't help thinking that way, especially when he almost seems to glow now, and is all soft skin and thin limbs and light.

He pushes him to the floor, crawling on top of his body. Draco is wonderful and responsive underneath him. He's peeling his clothes open, stripping them off. He wants to see him, all of him. The light from the living room throws his shadows, his body into sharp relief, there's the ticking of the grandfather clock, uncannily loud.

Harry relearns his body with hands and teeth and lips and tongue, all the same places that used to make him cry out and arch up, beg for

more – the expression of wonder, of amazement, Harry's never seen that, not even the first time they did it, Malfoy was always so careful to try and hide his expressions, and only the most intense ones showed through. Harry drinks in these new ones, so different now, so open and vulnerable, as if he's cast a spell and flayed him open, or taken some sort of magic knife and carefully dissected him.

He sucks on a pert pink nipple, biting down when it's hard and Draco seems unsure whether to arch up or try and get away, his hands on Harry's shoulders squeezing and suffering the same sort of conflict, unsure if more or less is what's needed, here. He scrapes his teeth over the ridges of muscle and bone, sucking hard on various places, leaving red marks because it's been so long since he's seen his marks on him that he wants to know that it's still possible, that he can still touch him like that.

Down the length of his body, rubbing his erection and making him whimper-moan, again that sound of uncertainty, unlike Draco's confidence but right all the same. Harry's heady with the sound, he takes his cock into his hand and strokes, smears the slick liquid at the head and watches the blonde shudder beneath him, panting out a tremulous, "H-Harry...what..."

And then he licks him, tongue so wet and tasting, curling his tongue around the tip and darting in to probe at the tear-shaped slit, tasting him salty and familiar; he had never wanted to do this for Draco, back then, thought it demeaning at first, but this is a sort of control, too, a sort of power, and Draco is his, his hands keeping his too-thin hips pinned to the floor, keeping him from thrusting. He licks him until the flesh is swollen, hot and red and flushed, tongue tracing the veins and then kissing his hip, the inside of his thigh – spread for him in – instinct or memory? – and biting the sensitive inside and marking him there, too. He could devour him, he could.

With an apologetic sort of kiss to the tip of the flushed and leaking erection – so wet, wet with precum, Draco wants him so much, has missed this as much as he has, after all these years - he finally takes him into his mouth, listening to the harsh sort of whimpers that tear out of Draco's mouth and he's hard again, wrapping his hand firmly around himself.

He thrusts, hard, into his own fist as he licks and sucks him, his other hand squeezing around the part of Draco's cock that he doesn't care to try and take, content with tasting him, sucking him, feeling him. With a strangled cry Draco comes as Harry's hand works him, as beautiful

as he ever was in his pleasure, just as beautiful and perfect in the memory. Harry swallows some of it, the taste bitter and salty and familiar, still, even after so long.

He's rubbing himself, trying to bring himself off, and then he gets up on his knees and rubs his own cock against Draco's slippery, wet and spent one, shuddering at the sound of moans because the flesh is oversensitive and Draco, in his post-orgasmic state, too weak to push him away. With one, hand he brings them together, squeezing the softening one against his hard one and when he finally climaxes, shuddering and pumping still, his seed is white against the white skin of Draco's smooth, flat belly.

Harry immediately kisses him, sloppy and his own mouth still tasting of semen. Draco makes a face and Harry kisses him anyway, holding his head still so he can't pull away.

It is, possibly, the best worst idea ever that he's ever had.

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-"Don't have sex. It leads to kissing and soon you'll have to talk to them."-

Sex, like all things where Malfoy was concerned, became a competition.

"You kiss like a fish," Malfoy once accused, a bit disdainfully – and unfairly, Harry thought.

"How *I* kiss?" he responded. "Don't even get me started on how *you* kiss."

This led to arguing and insults and shoving and no kissing at all, and Harry thought it was an unwise tactic. It was hard to predict, however, because sometimes shoving led to kissing, and it all depended on how moody Malfoy was that day, whether he would end up with a kiss-swollen lips or a fist-swollen eye.

At least all the sneaking around that they did at the beginning of the year made great practise for...sneaking around.

In the darkness of the empty classroom, another fantasy come to life, Harry's hand hovered over Malfoy's erect prick, the first time he had ever seen it out in the open. It suddenly seemed very intimidating. After all, outside of the change rooms, he had barely ever even seen other boys', never mind been *confronted* with one. And wasn't that just like Malfoy, every part of him was confrontational.

"It doesn't have teeth," Malfoy drawled. "Although right now, I really wish it did."

"It's um..." Harry said.

"Yes, yes, glorious and wonderful. You have one, too. Of course, yours probably isn't nice as mine, but we can't all be winners."

Harry told himself to stop being afraid of it, it's not like it would hurt him, and tentatively wrapped his fingers around Malfoy's erection, and marvelled at how it was both similar and different at once. Maybe Malfoy had a knack for being different and the same all at once. Like yin and yang, or something poetic like that.

The response was instantaneous - a sharp intake of breath, grey eyes squeezed shut, a little shiver. It was amazing how this could give you

control of a person. "Well....?" Malfoy asked, and his voice trembled only a little. "Are you shaking hands with it or are you actually going to do something?"

He slowly moved his hand to the base, where Malfoy's fine pale blonde pubic hair tickled his fingers, and then he slowly pulled it back towards him, squeezing just a little bit more and fixing his eyes to Malfoy's face, drinking in his expression.

Seeing it made it different, made it real.

It was surprising, how easy it was, once he'd gotten over the newness of it; it felt like his own and at the same time so different - the angle was different for one, and Malfoy seemed to be a bit slimmer than him, and he was pretty sure he never made *sounds* like that and that he never *looked* like that. And it shouldn't have been a surprise when Malfoy grabbed him and kissed him, teeth biting into his lip.

Harry wondered, as he changed the speed and pressure of his grip on Malfoy's prick, if he could train him into kissing better, and not knocking their mouths together like he was drunk and completely uncoordinated. He might have made a sound, or maybe it was Malfoy again, but he tasted blood and didn't mind it so much, and he pushed his tongue into Malfoy's mouth and his other hand wrapped around to his lower back, pulling him closer and keeping him from pushing back.

Malfoy, of course, was not to be outdone, and despite the distraction, he managed to work Harry's pants open and was slipping his hand inside.

It was an unspoken rule that the first one who came from this lost.

It was better than fighting, Harry thought, although sometimes he still wanted to rip into Malfoy, to hurt him. Other days, he thought, it was better than anything.

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-"If you start to think of your physical and moral condition, you usually find that you are sick."-

Harry wakes up the next morning with a pounding headache and Draco curled up tightly next to him in bed.

He pulls himself out of bed and goes to the toilet. He dry-heaves, hugging the porcelain.

He feels nauseous, still, and he's not sure how much of it, exactly, is actually the hangover.

Last night assaults him in a flurry of feelings and colours, sensations and tastes.

He can't trust himself, around Draco – Draco shouldn't trust him, but he does.

Harry doesn't want to do it again, ever. Except that he does, of course, but that's beside the point.

He goes back to the bed and Draco is lying there, relaxed and asleep and content and he doesn't look like he's been damaged. Not like the times back in school when Harry had hurt him, had left his marks all over his body.

Draco seems okay.

He had liked it, after all, he had pressed into Harry's touch and his body had begged for more.

No, no, he isn't allowed to think like that, it was wrong to take advantage of him like that. Draco couldn't possibly know – except part of him does know, doesn't it? Part of him remembers it, longs for it, even.

Harry's head is swimming.

Draco wakes up, grey eyes slitting open. Harry wants to apologise, and he doesn't even know where to begin – Draco would never understand it.

"H-Harry...?"

"Draco, last night, I—" he shakes his head.

Draco is looking at him curiously (curious as in curious and curious as in strange) his head cocked slightly to the side. He had never looked at Harry like that before; back in school he would have demanded Harry brush his teeth before giving morning kisses because ew, morning breath, and eventually given into kisses anyway. Back in school, he would have said, "and of course, a morning blowjob is fine, too."

"You liked it," Harry says. It isn't a question.

Harry takes his hands into his own and squeezes.

"You liked it," he repeats, nodding, remembering how wonderful and needy Draco had been. It wasn't like he hurt him, after all.

Draco, watching him, watching his eager expression and watching him nod, finally nods, slowly. His skin smells like musk and like their sheets – their sheets. Harry breathes in deep and sighs with relief.

-*-

-"A kiss is a lovely trick, designed by nature, to stop words when words become unnecessary."-

Malfoy didn't kiss nearly as well as he probably liked to think that he did.

The problem was that he always used too much teeth. Kissing Malfoy had a similar effect to ramming one's mouth up against something hard – he probably should have just done that instead. He was always so aggressive. And sometimes he was sloppy with it, and it was awkward, and you'd think after the first several times two people would get used to each other, but they always seemed to manage to end up with bruises.

The rumours of his kissing prowess were grossly exaggerated, and probably started by the kisser himself.

Malfoy was a sneaky bastard, and he'd manipulate people into thinking what he wanted them to think. He was evil. Obviously.

Kissing was clearly an evil activity, especially when Malfoy was doing it – even his kisses were malicious and cruel, it seemed, and it was evil that he wasn't even all that good at it but Harry wanted it anyway.

Malfoy being naked made it onto Harry's List of Evil things Malfoy did, also - this was evil simply because he was so very interesting to look at like that, smooth pale skin all over and a fascinating area between his legs.

Harry also knew that his neck was evil. It was pale, like he'd been sculpted out of some precious marble and given a little bit of colour to make him seem human. And it was horribly pretty, and distracting, and sometimes Harry hated that if he didn't get to kiss the stupid git, he'd end up thinking about his stupid throat, and how wonderful it must taste, how wonderful it was to close his teeth on the skin.

He bruised like a fruit, his skin showing the discolouring dark imprint and the flesh going soft and tender underneath. (There was a pun here that Harry was not going to make.)

Not that bruises were bad, though. Well, not all the time. Only that there were only so many times you could say "I just bumped into something" and have Ron believe you.

"On your neck?" Ron said once.
"It was a low-hanging something," Harry explained, rather quickly.
"Oh, okay."

Ron never asked too many questions. He was a good best friend, never asking too many questions.

Sometimes he wondered what Malfoy's friends would say about the bruises, but imagining Malfoy talking led to imagining his mouth, and imagining his mouth led to imagining his slender fingers pressing against his dark purple-yellow-brown bruises, and moaning.

It was during these sorts of imaginings that he'd have to spell his bed curtains closed, and then another spell to block the sounds before he started making them.

"This one looks like Africa," Malfoy noted, poking a bruise, hard, so that Harry would wince. "And this one looks like a swallow." He pressed in a little harder, massaging it, and the pain shot through Harry's arm. "I can't tell if it's an African or European swallow,

"If you squint, this one looks like a zebra. And this might be a giraffe." He pulled back, regarded him carefully. "Your body's much like a zoo, actually." He trailed his fingers down the length of Harry's torso. "All sorts of interesting exhibits."

"You're demented, you know that, right?" Harry asked him, once. "You are certifiably, absolutely, batshit insane."

"I don't have to take this," Malfoy had responded, "just because you're an uncreative sod who lacks all imagination doesn't mean you have to suck all the joy out of my life, as well." He had gotten up to leave and Harry had only managed to appease him by pulling him back and promising to suck something other than joy.

Malfoy's body was fascinating, a map of bruises. Harry liked to press down into them, too, just to see how far he could go before Malfoy cried out in pain, and then a little bit beyond that.

It wasn't supposed to be like this, this thing that you thought about. But it made sense, didn't it, that a mouth that twisted so cruelly and spouted such horrible things would be hard to kiss, as well.

"You mean nothing to me," Malfoy made a point of saying. Good, Harry thought. Because Malfoy was nothing. "As if I'd care," he'd snort.

Malfoy was the best form of evil, if only because he made those little sounds that he'd deny later when Harry touched his stomach, his hips, lower. And his teeth would crash into Harry's lips, or his teeth, or his tongue, and Harry would taste blood and not care to find out whose it was.

"I hate you. Shut up and kiss me," Malfoy might say,

And then Harry would be shoved up against a wall, his shoulder blades digging into the cold stone and there was a mouth biting at his lips, and pushing a tongue inside and—

Really, Malfoy was such a drama queen.

-*-

-"Hush now, baby, baby, don't you cry. Mother's gonna to make all your nightmares come true. Mother's going to put all her fears in you."-

Harry feels guilty when Draco has nightmares.

It makes his throat feel funny, and he'll try to swallow to release the bizarre pressure forming there, and nothing will happen.

The first words on the tip of his tongue are always "do you" followed by "remember," a word that he uses so much, a question that he asks so much, that Draco's beginning to hate it, if only because Harry looks so disappointed when he doesn't. Draco never remembers their life from before, all he can remember is the pain and the screaming when he went to sleep, that garbled ghost of a memory - where all the important events escape him and all that remains is the emotion, hot as a brand, searing through his body and skin.

In the end, Harry gives up. Instead he cradles him close, murmuring things like, "shh, shh…" and "it's all right, it's all right…" comforting sounds and nonsense words just meant to soothe, like the kind that nobody had ever said to him. He sifts his fingers through damp, blonde hair, kisses his face, wet with both the salt of sweat and the salt of tears.

And although he makes it better, he somehow feels as if it's all his fault, when, if the fault should fall on anyone, it should be Draco himself.

He can't shake the feeling, feels himself shaking, long afterwards.

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-"There was no telling what people might find out if they were allowed to ask whatever questions they wanted to."-

Malfoy was impossible to talk to – about anything, really. Conversations were cut short or diverted, the routes of words re-routed until the original destination was completely lost.

"What about Pansy?" Harry asked, suddenly, once.

Malfoy turned to him, pale brow arching with clear contempt. "What about Pansy?"

Harry's eyes narrowed; he wasn't about to let the blonde get away so easily with this. "Why are you answering my question with a question?"

Malfoy only regarded him coolly, his grey eyes steely and unforgiving. "Why are you asking a question you don't want an answer to?"

Harry sighed. "Why can't you just give me a straight answer?"

Malfoy's expression didn't change. "Why can't you just give me a straight answer?"

"Malfoy, you're not the one asking the question!"

"Exactly!"

"That doesn't even make sense!" Harry cried.

"You don't make sense!" Malfoy said, and then the discussion was over.

"You have no right to ask about Pansy," Malfoy said, later, his fingers digging in to the curve of Harry's hip. "I don't know what you think this is or what you think you can do, but Pansy-questions are not a part of you and me."

Harry saw the two of them, sometimes, sitting together out in the courtyard where everyone could see, one light head and one dark one, bowed together. Pansy laughed when Draco spoke to her, in the Great Hall and in the hallways, head tossed back and braying, and Harry wanted to break bones. She looked so happy. They looked so happy.

She was such a *bitch*, pug-faced and ugly and Harry was not allowed

to say a thing about it. Years later, when he was happy with Ginny, he would smile, and think about how *they* looked together, smiling and happy. He never asked her to come to the hospital with him, but sometimes, when he was holding her hand as they walked along Diagon Alley or in the park, he would think about it.

Years ago, Malfoy had taken Pansy Parkinson to the Yule Ball. Years later, Pansy would survive only to kill herself after her parents and her brother were given the Kiss. Draco wouldn't remember her by then, of course, but if he did, he was not allowed to ask, because Pansy questions are not a part of you and me.

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-"The anger of the weak never goes away… it just gets a little mouldy. It moulds like a beautiful blue cheese in the dark, growing stronger and more interesting."-

Harry wishes Voldemort were alive. He would kill him all over again, and make it good this time, do it slowly this time, precisely, peeling back that putrid green skin from withered flesh, sliding his thumbs into red jelly eyes and digging in until they popped.

And he deserves something, doesn't he?

He promises both himself and Draco that what happened when he was drunk wouldn't happen again. But Draco liked it, and who is he to deny him anything he wants? Harry touches him, holds him close, makes him come – because he's beautiful in his pleasure, body shuddering and out of his control. Draco needs to be taken care of. Draco needs someone to look after him and make him happy.

Although there are the days where Harry really hates Draco. Really, truly, deeply. Except this isn't the Draco that he hates. Or maybe he just hates this Draco, specifically. He doesn't know anymore, and hitting him would be like hitting a kitten or a puppy, anyway, something soft and defenceless with big eyes, so instead he goes into a room and screams and screams.

The first time, he had forgotten to cast a Silencing Charm.

Draco had wanted to know what was the matter, grey eyes wide and terrified, and Harry had only barely managed not to wrap his hands around his throat and *squeeze*.

He'd never hurt Draco, of course. And he most certainly would never, ever hurt Draco the way that Draco had once hurt him.

"I'll never ever leave you," Harry promises, trying out the words in the darkness of his bedroom – their bedroom, the one that they shared, together. Is Draco already asleep? It doesn't really matter. The words sound full in the dark, Draco breathing and warm by his side.

"I'll never betray you."

"I'll never let you be alone again."

He wants to call him endearments, things that he wished that they said to him when he was little, but they didn't, because they didn't

love him enough. Love, pet, darling, baby. His own parents abandoned him, he was as good as orphaned, they were the same. He doesn't say these things, because Draco never would have stood for such moronic sentimentalities back in school. Or whatever he would have called them.

He holds him tight at night and whispers to him instead, words that mean nothing and it's all the same.

He presses into him, hard, watching every expression, the shape of his mouth when he cries out, whether in pleasure or in pain. He realises that he had missed things that he hadn't known to miss.

There are places on him good for grabbing, in order to pull him close. A thin wrist, a slim waist. He fit snugly against the curve of Harry's body, clearly meant to be held there.
Growing up, Harry had never had anyone hold him, all his life. Draco probably didn't, either – Lucius certainly wouldn't, and Narcissa had never struck him as the particularly maternal type; she loved him, sure, but she was so cold – at least, from what Harry remembers of her.

"It's all right," Harry tells Draco, "I'll be the one to take care of you, now. I'll take care of everything."

His arms wrapped tightly around him, Harry knows Draco is grateful even if he can't express it. He strokes the soft blonde hair and Draco looks out the window, watching the trees and the birds outside.

-*-

-"A weak man has doubts before a decision, a strong man has them afterwards."-

"Potter, it's wet out here," Malfoy whinged. He would always find something to complain about, but it was true that the grass was damp with some unknown evening chill – a fog that settled upon it, like a wet ghost laid down to rest, just for a moment.

"And it's cold," Malfoy continued. "I shall catch my death of cold and then you'll be sorry. Unless, of course, you're into necrophilia. Potter, are you into necrophilia? You sick, sick child. What other kinky and disturbing fetishes have you been hiding from me?"

Harry punched his arm, lightly. "Stop sounding so hopeful."

The sad thing was that he was actually rather pretty in the moonlight, something Harry would not have admitted unless under threat of certain death by something gruesome.

The Quidditch field at night had seemed like such a good idea, in theory. Harry pulled Malfoy close to shut him up; Malfoy shivered and pretended to resist before slumping against him.

The stars, the night sky, the moon above them, the field where they played out their battles and Malfoy cheated and Harry always won anyway.

Malfoy faked a sneeze.

"I'm dying," he proclaimed. "It's pneumonia."

"You're not dying."

"Yes, I am! And I'm taking you with me, I hope I'm really contagious, and I hope you suffer for a long, long time."

Harry wondered if it would ruin the mood to remind Malfoy that this was his idea.

"I was almost Sorted into Slytherin," Harry told him, as if he should care.

Malfoy arched a brow in interest. "Oh?"

"Yes, but I didn't want it at all. I kept on thinking, not Slytherin, not

Slytherin, not Slytherin."

"Lovely," Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Yes, because we're all evil and horrible, nasty people."

"Yes, you're absolutely despicable," Harry agreed, amiably.

"Which is why you're fondling me with such hatred."

"Not fondling."

"Okay, touching," Malfoy corrected himself. "In sensitive areas, might I add."

"Anyway, shut up, I'm trying to make a point here. It's just that, I think that's how it works. Like, if you wanted it really hard, the Sorting Hat would give it to you."

"Potter!" Malfoy said, making a distinctly scandalised noise. "First corpses, now hats? Does your sexual perversity know no bounds?"

Harry blushed bright, bright red. "Shut up, Malfoy."

"Hats don't go there, Potter."

"Unless it's an arse-hat..." Malfoy continued. Unable to resist the opportunity for an insult, he went on to say, "And you would be incapable of telling the difference from it and your elbow, by the way. Just so you know."

"Thanks for the bulletin," Harry said.

"I live to provide vital information. Are you done talking yet?" he asked, starting to kiss Harry's neck.

"I would be if someone would stop interrupting me," Harry told him, although not quite as sharply as he intended, mainly because the kissing was getting distracting. He pushed Malfoy back a bit, and then kissed his aggrieved expression. "What I'm trying to say is, there's always a choice, isn't there? Like, even in the things that you think are made up for you before you even start."

"Well, of course," Malfoy said, "Destiny's just a name given to choices with dramatic consequences."

-*-

-"A kiss may ruin a human life."-

The tube of lubricant is strangely heavy in Harry's hand, despite its inherent lightness. The physical property of its weight, this, too, can shift. Reality can shift on you, memory and past and present. What matters is the here and the now. When he opens it, the crack of the cap is like a loud clap in the darkness of the room, and suddenly Harry wants the lights on.

He wants to be able to see him, all of him, properly, the way he hadn't their first time, so many years ago. He wants to learn the geography of his body, map him all over again, rearrange the positioning of his own world.

He kisses Draco's throat and he makes a small noise, he hums with pleasure. That noise has to be pleasure, the whimper isn't distress, it can't be anything else.

When he kisses him, the heat of his mouth is silky and soft, velvet-wet – so achingly gentle now, so different. The strands of hair feather between his fingers.

He loves Draco's hands. Long, white elegant fingers, he kisses each one, licks the sensitive skin between. He licks up his arm and then his hands grab either side of his ribs, fingers settling on the skin in between, pulled drum-tight; he's gained weight, under Harry's careful eye, but not much.

One hand settles on his chest; he can feel his heart beating, fluttering rapidly. And then it slides down his torso, tracing a line down the centre of him, as if drawing the line to use for cutting him open.

Draco's hard from his touching, his ministrations, and so he touches him lightly, stroking just one finger up one side and then down the other, watching his dick throb and twitch.

And on goes the journey, down to this most secret, private, dirty place, circling and feeling the ridges of it, teasing the sensitive skin there.

His fingers, slick, pressing in, in to that tightness, the heat the softness of his vulnerable insides. Draco opens his mouth like a baby bird and cries out.

"Shh, shh," Harry soothes him, gentles him – he didn't used to be gentle but Draco didn't used to be hollow-bone fragile.

But insistently he opens him, spreads him, and there's shaking and shuddering and all the soothing in the world won't keep him still so Harry doesn't try. He kisses the curve of a hip, the inside of a thigh, the hot length of his arousal. He slicks himself with a trembling hand, and then he moves himself into position, slowly pushes in.

He'll probably bruise, on his hips, imprints of fingers, one purple mark for each touch.

Harry presses close and the closer still, as if trying to get deep into the core of him, into the magma of his soul. It feels as if he's crawling underneath the skin, burrowing as deep inside of him as he can, and in a way he wishes it could be forever.

And then he fucks him - just as gently and just as brutally as he had been that first time, all those years ago. Pulling out and slamming back in, watching each expression, the flicker of each forgotten emotion. He makes sure he comes - fondling him mercilessly, touching and squeezing and consuming. The feeling of him tight and convulsing around him is perfection, and his orgasm is so intense it cuts through him.

Draco shakes and sobs afterwards. Harry can't think why and Draco probably doesn't even know himself, but Harry holds him and rocks him until all the tears have run dry.

-*-

-"Sex is an emotion in motion."-

"It's always sex with you, isn't it?" Malfoy asked archly, kissable - damnit, not kissable lips, just plain lips - curled into a sneer. Harry wanted to wipe it off his face.

Preferably using mouth and teeth and tongue.

(And then Malfoy's lips would be bright cherry red, and glistening wet, and then he'd pant and his mouth would drop open just a little and then he'd moan)

"See? I bet you're thinking horribly sordid thoughts about me and strawberry jam right this very instant. It's written all over your face. Have you no shame?"

Harry didn't think this was a very fair judgment. After all, in the beginning, it had always been Malfoy wanting and wanting and he had given in, it had been Malfoy who had taken him and forged him (hammered and pounded was a bad metaphor, an inappropriate image) into something different. It also wasn't very fair that as soon as Malfoy suggested, he immediately began to think of strawberry jam, nevermind other breakfast condiments.

"What the bloody hell, Malfoy," Harry began to snarl, growing defensive because there was all that heat and if he didn't turn it into anger then he didn't know what else to do. "Are you saying that you called me out here in the middle of the night and I'm not supposed to expect sex--"

"How typical of you, Potter, always leaping to ignorant conclusions," the blonde interrupted, cutting him off very rudely. And he wanted to have sex with this? Please.

No, very much so, another part of him protested quite avidly.

He was so busy about to launch into an argument with this part of him that he didn't even notice that Malfoy had began to approach until he was standing oh so close, achingly close, just a grab-and-fist-his-robes-and-yank's distance away from him.

Harry gasped when he felt an elegant hand cup his crotch.

"You have the listening comprehension skills of deaf elephant," he

said. "Did I ever say I minded?"

-*-

-"He who fights monsters must take care lest he become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."-

Draco is painting. He swirls the paint with his fingers, feeling it cold and slimy between skin and paper. There is a smear of orange-and-blue just next to his nose and Harry has to resist the urge to spit in a napkin and scrub it off. His paintings are rough, childish, yet somehow sophisticated in their crudeness, like when man first chiselled into cave rock. He paints creatures – hippogriffs with vicious teeth, big, black dogs, blobs of black and grey against a blue paper sky. Once, a smooth green S with red dots for eyes.

"Turns you to st—st--..." he stops, frustrated. "Rock."

Harry stares at the pictures. "Draco," he says. "Do you remember?"

Draco blinks at him with eyes like storm clouds.

" Why do you paint these things?" Harry asks.

"I like monssers," Draco explains.

Monsters, as if that explains everything. And maybe it does.

-*-

-"A man gazing on the stars is proverbially at the mercy of the puddles in the road."-

Astronomy Tower, two in the morning. There was a soft blanket on the floor.

Their tongues overlapped like scales, identical and shiny. Hair turned to ash between sweaty fingers and he grasped at it, at shoulders and hips and everything sharp, gasping. He smelled like smoke and tasted like things you shouldn't put in your mouth, sour and quickly bitter.

He would build a cage of him, and make it out of thorns and barbed bone, polished to the white of the moon. He would stretch his skin tight over it, make the softest gloves from his hide.

Malfoy was trying to cultivate a vice: sex and drinking not edgy enough, he turned to cigarettes, too – tried to curl the smoke out of his mouth like his namesake, but he ended up getting sick instead. Harry found that he liked the smell of cigarettes but didn't particularly care for smoking, and in punishment for their affront to Malfoy the whole pack was set on fire.

Under the moon and the stars it seemed that anything was possible; time was not time and there was only here and now and feeling. The moon wasn't even full, but more a waxing gibbous, just a sliver shy of full, and Harry preferred it that way, because it meant that there was always tomorrow.

-*-

-"Ever has it been that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation."-

"I have to go to work," Harry says. He doesn't mean it, he just says it because he likes to watch Draco's reaction.

He likes to see the disappointment in those grey eyes, gone to the colour of slate, likes to see his mouth pout and his lips tremble.

And then there's the soft way he whines, "Do you have to?"

He can stay home forever. For Draco, everything is a discovery. Harry envies him, suddenly, watching him eye a houseplant with great curiosity, pale fingers reaching out to stroke waxy, dark green leaves. Harry envies him, the way he's forgotten, the way he's innocent again.

He touches Draco gently, his hand a caress all over that smooth skin. He had missed it so much, especially in those days afterwards, when he had thought he wouldn't be able to touch it again, and there had never been a goodbye. He remembers how he scouted the battlefields, looking over the bodies, remembers the jolting sick feeling whenever he saw blonde hair covered in mud. That horrible moment before he rolled the body over or got a better look at the face.

Draco cries out, suddenly, with pain. Harry's squeezing down hard enough to bruise.

It goes on a second too long, punishing, almost, and then Harry realises what he's doing and he snatches his hand away.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, rubbing over the reddened flesh. Draco makes a small whimper of pain but he holds out his arm, Harry lifts it to his lips and kisses it, and then he kisses him, hands cupping his face.

He can make everything better. He'll always make it better.

And blood on pale white skin really shouldn't turn him on the way it does.

Draco's slipped and hurt himself. Harry's not sure how it happened, really, but Ron and Hermione have said similar things when Rose learned to walk – turn your back for a moment and there she is, on the floor and crying.

"Shh, Draco," Harry soothes, even back then, Draco would be covered with marks and bruises and he would whine about it for attention and sympathy. Half the time Harry humoured him.

Instead of casting Episkey he gets a band-aid, suddenly longing for this caring act.

"Let me kiss it better, hm?"

Draco bites his lip and nods, those pretty grey eyes so filled with tears.

He kisses the band-aid and then he kisses Draco, his tongue snaking in to the wet and warmth. He cups Draco's face to better guide the kiss, wanting to crawl all over that slighter body.

He can't imagine needing more than this. Draco is needy underneath him, wanting. He'll always know where he is, doesn't need to worry about a thing, not any more.

Harry stays home for another day.

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-"Truth, like light, blinds. Falsehood is a beautiful twilight that enhances every object."-

Curled together in bed at night, comforter tucked around their hips, Harry strokes Draco's hair and tells him all the things that he should remember.

"You hated your father," he says softly, lips just brushing the soft skin of a pale cheek, "but I rescued you from him."

Draco frowns and furrows his brow. "Was he bad?"

"He was a horrible, horrible man…but I always knew that you weren't like him at all."

Draco nods, tightening his arm around Harry's waist.

"Th-thank you, Harry," he says, and tucks his head under Harry's chin. "'m lucky to h-have you."

Harry thinks he is very lucky, too, and he tilts Draco's face up so that he can kiss him properly.

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-"There is probably no more terrible instant of enlightenment than the one in which you discover your father is a man—with human flesh."-

"Shut your mouth about my father before I shut it for you," Malfoy hissed.

The Daily Prophet had arrived at school one day; Lucius Malfoy was to be interrogated on the rise of You-Know-Who; he had refused to talk, of course, but as the cliché went, there are always ways of making him talk.

Harry hadn't been the one to bring it up, but he saw no reason not to see the conversation through.

"He's a Death Eater, Malfoy—"

"He's my dad—"

This caught Harry off-guard in ways that he had not anticipated. He had always thought of Draco Malfoy as having a father, a father figure even, but never a dad. It was a level of intimacy, of informality, that he could not comprehend.

"He made poor decisions," Harry said, arms crossed and narrowed. He thought he had come to an understanding about Malfoy these past couple of months, but perhaps not.

"Look, it's not that fucking simple. Everything's so easy for you, oooh, I'm Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived, there's good and there's evil and that's that!"

"It is that simple!" Harry burst out, "Either you want Muggles and Muggleborns to die or you don't, you want a psychotic Dark Wizard to take over the world or you don't and you—" He grabbed Malfoy's left arm, fingers curling around the familiar flesh and digging in. He wanted to mark him. He pulled Malfoy to him. "This, this means that you're not like that, are you, you're not like *them*, you're not going to be an idiot and a murderer—"

"Don't you touch me! Don't you *fucking* touch me!" Malfoy screamed at him, wrenching his arm away violently.

He spat on the floor. "I could kill you, I'd do it, you don't even know

how I'd love to. Don't act like you *know* me, Potter."

"You're so full of shit, Malfoy," Harry said, shaking his head in disgust.

"And you're fucking naive," Malfoy said, and then he walked away without once looking back.

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-"I don't like the sound of all those lists he's making – it's like taking too many notes at school, you feel like you've achieved something when you haven't."-

Harry made Lists. The support groups all advocated this. Hermione's books all advocated this. Good Thoughts for the Day. Reasons to Live. Why Harry Potter Saving Us All Is a Very Good Thing Indeed.

Grocery lists, even. Task lists.

Rules were important. Back at school they were only for breaking, but now Draco needed some structure in his life. This time around, they were going to do it right.

-No going outside without me.
-Do your lessons.
-No TV programme that hasn't been approved by me.
-Always do as I say, not as I do.
-And most importantly of all, I am always right.
-In the case that I am wrong, see above.
-I always know what's best for you.

He's not sure if Draco can read them, but he writes them down anyway, and he reads them to him until Draco can repeat them back, the same way they had once memorised those Twelve Snapean Taslks.

Hermione pours tea in his kitchen. The brown liquid steams from her cup. "He's very attached to you, isn't he?"

Harry bites his lip, looking into his own cup of tea, suppressing a smile. "Oh?" he asks. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes," Hermione says, "he can't take his eyes off of you. It's like you're the only person who exists."

It's the same as back in school, then, Harry decides. The way that they would look across the Great Hall, and in the sea of heads and faces, still only be able to see each other.
"Really," he says.

"It's a good thing," Hermione says, decisively. She slowly pours the milk into her cup, and then drops in one cube of sugar, then two. "Yes.

It is. I mean, you're the only one he has now, aren't you? He needs someone to look after him, to care about him."

"Right," Harry agrees.

"And it's good for you to have someone to look after, someone who needs you," Hermione continues, her metal spoon clinking against the ceramic of her teacup as she stirs the liquid, round and round. "I know, ever since Rose came along, you've felt a little distant from us but – Harry, you know you can always come talk to Ron and me, right? Anytime at all."

"I know, Hermione," Harry says. He takes a slow sip from his tea. The teacup has a faded flower pattern, and the bit of gold around the rim is rubbed away, a little. "You're a good friend," he reassures her. "You and Ron are my best friends."

"Right," says Hermione. "And...we support you, Harry, you know that, and, well, we just want you to be happy."

"Mm-hmm," Harry nods.

Hermione gives him a smile that's just a little bit off, the tiniest bit wobbly. She takes a deep breath and then smiles again. She picks up her tea, spoon still in the cup, and doesn't drink it.

"Harry..." she says, after a moment, "you don't do what you used to do, do you? I mean. With Malfoy."

"What, fight?" Harry asks. "Hermione, are you mad? Just *look* at him."

"No, Harry, I mean, ah...do you...are you sleeping with him?" she asks, keeping her voice light.

Harry frowns slightly but then lets it transform into a noncommittal expression. "Of course he sleeps with me. He's terrified of sleeping alone."

"No, Harry, that's not what I mean and you know it. Are you and him —"

"What?" Harry asks, turning his supposedly famous supposedly frightening green gaze on her intently.

"Nothing." She sighs and puts her cup back on the table. "Never mind."

"He gets nightmares, you know," Harry supplies for her.

"I'll bet," she says.

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-"An apology for the devil: it must be remembered that we have only heard one side of the case; God has written all the books."-

At the end of autumn the leaves fell, hissed sibilantly as they scraped across stone.

"*After practise.*"

The note said that and nothing more, crawled in elegant longhand. Some of the letters were smushed together, as if the author had been in a hurry. Black smudges dotted the page, telltale signs that the paper had been folded up while the ink was still wet.

The parchment crumpled up easily in a slightly sweaty palm, like a dried gold leaf.

Harry met him on the Quidditch pitch; he was still wearing all his protective gear and his hair was tousled by the wind. Malfoy said, "Go get your broom," and Harry knew that all was forgiven.

He did not say anything stupid like, "apology accepted" – after all, after all the grief Malfoy had once given him for his own apology, he doubted that saying something like that would come to anything good – although it would be very satisfying. In the end, it wasn't worth it.

After they had chased the Snitch for hours – Harry let Malfoy beat him, 5 to 3, to let him know that he had forgiven him, as well – they went into the change rooms and the cheesy *Wicked Wet Wild Whatever Wizards* fantasy was fulfilled.

Harry watched Malfoy put on his clothes afterwards; he was always so meticulous about it. It was the most awkward part of any of their meetings, mainly because it was acknowledged that they not speak to each other, and they had not spoken to each other, much during this encounter at all.

Straightening his Slytherin tie, Malfoy said, "My father bought me my first broom. When I was six. He taught me how to fly."

Harry didn't say anything – wasn't sure if he even wanted to hear more. Malfoy shrugged, and, discouraged by the silence, let the subject drop.

Harry pulled the blonde to him and kissed him, hard, pressing his back against the cold metal of the lockers.

Hermione wrote to Viktor Krum. Ron snogged Lavender. Harry wondered when they would both just get over it already and admit that they were madly in love with each other and meant to be together forever.

Harry insisted that he wasn't in a relationship, he didn't plan to be in one, and no, he wasn't becoming increasingly obsessed with Draco Malfoy.

"You're drowning in a river in Egypt," Hermione had said.

And what was that supposed to mean? She didn't even know anything about this at all.

Harry wanted to start sentences with "Malfoy says..." and just barely stopped himself from doing it.

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-"K is for Kate who was struck by with an axe. L is for Leo who swallowed some tacks. M is for Maud who was swept out to sea. N is for Neville who died of ennui."-

Harry can't stay away from work forever – according to whom? Logistically, he has plenty of money left in the bank to support him for many years yet, possibly the rest of his life, even.

He's rich, he doesn't have to work. His partners keep quitting, anyway. For a while he lost himself in cases and paperwork, but he doesn't need that now. What's the point?
Well, apparently it's not considered a sign of stable mental health for a traumatised war veteran to spend 24/7 locked up in his flat with his damaged ex-lover who has a child-mind, seeking no contact from the outside world whatsoever.

"Of course it sounds terrible if you phrase it like that," Harry had said to Hermione. "And it's not even wholly true. I have contact with the outside world sometime. Where else would we get our groceries?"

Still, it appears that appearances have to be kept. It is worth it, in some ways, for the way that Draco greets him when he comes home, arms wrapped tightly around him, face buried in the crook of his neck.

A house elf is not enough company for a young boy --a damaged man --a young boy.

Kreacher gets along with Draco, and Draco feels at home with him. It occurs to Harry that this is how he spent his childhood, with only house elves.

Harry can give Draco better than that.

Perhaps Luna could take care of him, since she's been looking for an odd job here and there after the war – and quite literally, she's been looking for an odd job. But as soon as he thinks it, Harry frowns. He likes Luna well enough, she's his friend, after all, and Draco and her would most likely get along, now – they both had that certain quality about them. But he would not trust Luna to take care of his cat, never mind his Draco.

A professional was perhaps best for this sort of thing.

He places an advert in the paper.

It takes a while to select the proper words. "Nanny" sounds wrong. "Baby-sitter" sounds even worse. "Au pair" would be incorrect. There's something almost disturbing about "child-minder," and a governess, although Draco might have had one at some point (or he might not, who knew how Wizarding families worked), isn't what he's looking for at all. Nursemaid, now that was just being ridiculous.

The final advert reads:
WANTED: Caretaker/nurse for very unique situation. Previous hospital experience appreciated, but not necessary.

He writes down the pay, the days that she would be needed, and a contact number, nothing else. Last thing he wants is a flock of people dying to work for Harry Potter, after all. Just to be sure, he places an advert in the Muggle paper as well.

A Muggle girl answers. She is a home nurse, she says. She doesn't shy away from the fact that Draco is 24 but acts five. Harry thinks it would be a good influence for Draco, so that this time, he can teach him right, and he won't learn bad words like Mudblood.

The first couple of days go by very smoothly. Draco likes her because she smells nice, and she says he is sweet. Still, Harry is all too eager to send her home when he gets home, if only for the fact that he wants to make up for all the time that he's spent away from Draco.

Everything looks like it will all work out, until the day she happens upon Kreacher, of course.

Mindy Miver is promising. She's 19, and strings small toys together to make belts.

She thinks that Draco should learn hopscotch, which is fine until one day he decides to set her hair on fire. It wasn't her fault. How could she have known that Draco hated hopscotch?

Mary Lee. She has bright orange hair and loves to eat Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans.
She doesn't let Draco have any, except for the yucky ones.
"This is really yummy, you'll love it!" she'd say, as she handed him Vomit or Earwax.

In a week, Mary Lee falls ill to a mysterious sickness, and asks for sick leave. Some sort of stomach virus, she says, can't stop vomiting or going to the loo. She doesn't ever come back.

That's not counting the ones who interview for him and that he sends away before they can even see Draco. He asks them questions about their involvement in the war and their hypothetical attitudes towards Death Eaters. He watches them squirm in their seats and later tells them, "thank you for your time, I will be giving you a call."

This one smells of prune juice. This one reminds him of Mrs. Figg, and while Harry personally had nothing against Mrs. Figg, he did not have fond memories of her either, and he would rather hope that Draco would only make good memories with him.

The young girls seem to work out better than anybody else – for a short period of time, at least. Pretty, bubbly things who want to work extra hard to impress him, because he's Harry Potter. It probably helps that they find Draco attractive, and seeing as how they don't follow the news or politics, so as long as Harry keeps one of his arms bandaged, it's all right.

Angie Holt. She doesn't believe Draco's forgotten the basics, and brings books for him to study. She watches television, fascinated by it, while Draco reads the books. She ends up slipping on the hallway carpet and hitting her head on the wall, splitting it open. She goes to St, Mungo's and does not return to work.

Lynn Craig, a mysterious girl who dressed all in black and acted a little too excited at the Death Eater portion of the interview. She seems nice and caring, however, so Harry decides she may have a chance. She ended up getting burnt by the stove. No one knows what happened.

"A...A is for A-my, wh-who fell down the stairs," Draco recites, "B is for B-Basil, as-saulted by b-bears."

Harry gives him a look that is meant to be stern. "I'm going to stop reading you that book if it gives you ideas."

Draco looks at him, completely innocent.

Dana Hayner sends her resume by owl, and it's rather impressive. She's been trained in both Muggle nursing care and magical medicine. She's done volunteer work on that floor of St. Mungo's, and anyone who would go there voluntarily for ghost-tending had to have a good soul.

She loves children and small animals. What more could he ask for?

Harry's pretty sure that she's perfect - until the day Dana shows up and she turns out to be, not a pretty little thing with a braided bun, but rather a muscular man with hairy arms and tattoos standing on his Welcome mat.

"You're a male nurse...?"

"You gotta problem with that?" the man challenges, his voice gruff and thick with Irish brogue.

"Well, Mr. Hayner..." Harry begins.

"Call me Dana," Dana said gruffly.

"Okay, erm, Dana..."

Draco seemed to like him, however, for whatever reason. Then again, Harry supposes, he's always liked strong, brutish things that he can lord over. He thinks of two mountains of muscle, and how they were gone, now.

Dana is hired on the spot.

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-"I get a little warm in my heart when I think of winter; I put my hand in my father's glove. I run off where the drifts get deeper – Sleeping Beauty trips me with a frown."-

Snow fell and covered everything almost three weeks before Christmas; Harry wondered whether it got cold in the Slytherin dungeons. It must have been cold, all stones and under a frozen lake. He almost wanted to ask Malfoy if he wore an extra jumper, but that made him feel too much like mum.

Malfoy made him think of ice and snow, pale as he was, of course. He could almost write a poem if he didn't suck at poetry, and anyway, it wasn't a poem if it didn't rhyme.

In a desperate ploy for imagery, he wanted to think that he was trapped under the ice, in the throes of winter, like a pickled foetus floating in a glass jar. (Like an abomination stored for a potions ingredient.) Harry could put his hand to Malfoy's hand, palm to palm, fingertips mirroring fingertips and they would never touch.

Hate tasted like ice cubes that melt your mouth into numb.

He would get frostbite.

'The ice was so cold,' he might write, 'that it burned like fire that you can touch.' He thought that it was a rather horrible line; he was nobody's poet, and that sort of thing was girly and not at all on – so of course, leave it to Draco Malfoy would like poetry.

Christmas holidays came and went; Harry and Draco went to their respective families – Harry with Ron and the rest and Malfoy back to Malfoy Manor, of course.

Harry kissed Draco twice before he left; Draco had just come in from outside and his mouth was cold. He feathered a kiss over Harry's mouth; it burned and lasted barely a second, like a snowflake melting on his lips. He pulled away and then Harry pulled him back, kissed him until his mouth was warm.

Christmas at the Weasleys' was warm and festive as always. There was a lot of food, a lot of drinking. Harry, slightly tipsy on eggnog, had

kissed Ginny jokingly under the mistletoe, and Ginny, for all her prettiness and previous experience with boys, had turned the same colour as her hair.

When they returned to Hogwarts, Draco was somber, quieter; he avoided Harry for days and Harry knew he had gone home to one half of a family.

When the Owl finally came Harry felt it was long overdue; it had been a week, at least, since they had come back from holiday. He was one inch away from literally climbing the walls. He could be a new type of hero, one that wore red and blue and a mask and knew how to shoot web.

He really needed his own theme song. (He wouldn't be able to write his own, however.)

He met Draco outside of the Slytherin Dungeons and under his Invisibility Cloak he followed him into his private room – they had done it here maybe once before, using the same methods. Harry privately thought it felt a little chilly, maybe he could convince Malfoy to get an extra blanket? It wasn't like he couldn't afford it, after all.

Malfoy did not waste a moment; he pushed Harry down on the bed and climbed on top of him, mouth already seeking out the taste of his skin.

"Fuck me," he said, his voice both soft and harsh. Harry swallowed and started to ask, "Are you su—" before he was cut off by a rough kiss.

He flashed a little bit of skin, the tautness that showed when he stretched because that wool jumper hiked up just so. Desire curdled in Harry's stomach and tugged hard on the strings down below.

Harry's fingers ran down the snowscape of skin, and Malfoy – Draco - was so hot that he felt cold.

His breath hitched and all he could do was nod.

The pristine white sheets and covers of the infirmary resembled snow in a way; Harry suddenly wanted to damage him again, bruise and bloody him, purples and reds, so he could lay him down on a bed of

pure white.

And even the tang of his sweat tasted like icicle runoff, and at nighttime the water would freeze at the apex of the surface, drawing it out to be longer, thinner, sharper.

The pads of Harry's fingers clutched the back of his neck digging trails leaving fingerprints all over his body.

That had been the first time, for the both of them.

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-"Love is so short, and forgetting is so long."-

And it wasn't fair that Draco had forgotten. Harry wakes from a nightmare and looks over at Draco, asleep in bed and peaceful. He had nightmares sometimes, too, but as soon as he woke and saw Harry, they were all forgotten, it seemed.

He wakes him with a rough kiss, hands - everything, anything but gentle.

He bites him and Draco cries out, hurt, pained, and Harry does not stop.

Afterwards he holds him, whispers, "Sorry, sorry,

But although Draco is sore all over, his flesh marked by Harry's hands and teeth, he does not complain. Doesn't even whine about it. He had come, after all, he liked it. Harry always knows exactly how to give him what he likes, what he wants and needs.

He clings to Harry tightly, head tucked into the curve of his neck. Harry doesn't have nightmares for a week.

Ron calls him later that week, using that phone he so loves.

"Hey, Harry, it's me. Look, Hermione says that...I mean, I just wanted to say...I'm very happy for you."

"Oh," says Harry. And then, much more genuinely, much more warmly, "thanks."

Ron continues, "I think you're good for him. And it's good that you're not alone anymore."

"Right," Harry says. They were always so worried about that, about him being alone. As if there wasn't a difference between alone and lonely.

"I mean...I really wanted you and Ginny to work out, you know, but I guess sometimes things don't happen the way we plan, do they?"

"It's a really good thing that you're doing. I know I wouldn't be able to do it. You're something else, Harry."

"Oh," says Harry, warmly. "Thanks, Ron. That means a lot."

-*-

-"To write a good love letter, you ought to begin without knowing what you mean to say, and to finish without knowing what you have written."-

The carnage of a hundred 'will you be mines' laid spread out before him. It was a massacre of loneliness, hearts torn out from ripped white paper envelopes. Red and pink and white lay silently desperate, silently pleading for attention. His admirers would give anything for a few scraps of affection, shiny and thin and crinkly like crumpled up pieces of foil with the tiny crumbs of chocolate still left inside. The red clashed with the pink. Love is a battlefield.

He licked a sugared heart but the 'I love you' smears in a wash of pale crimson. Just warm saliva was left behind, filling in the carved grooves.

(Mostly, most of the time, you're disgusted with yourself.)

Snow drifted down like white confetti or bits of lace trim torn from those pretty red paper hearts. There was no red in this scene, of course, because that would be unnatural and wrong. He could see red, however, stark against the white, blooming dark and bright and alive. He could see red the way it would be if you smashed your fist into that perfect face and made his nose drip bright like a gash of petals from that exploded bouquet.

(You don't want him you don't want him you don't want him but you do.)

The hearts crunched between his teeth.

The aftertaste, like desire lingering upon his tongue, was slightly bitter and unpleasant.

Malfoy wanted a competition to see who could have the most love letters on Valentine's Day.

He won by a landslide.

"You can't write them to yourself!" Harry said.

"Why not?" Malfoy asked. "On this, this holiday celebrating that beautiful fleeting emotion called love, I wished to celebrate the person

I loved most in the world."

Harry sighed at first but then he laughed, in spite of himself. Why write to anyone pledging love and undying devotion? It wasn't like it meant anything, and putting it in print didn't make it the truth.

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-"This opera is as lousy as it is brilliant."-

Ron calls him up on a Monday. Actually, Ron calls him up most days. After nine years, he's finally mastered the telephone, and he's very proud of it. Hermione got him a cell phone for his birthday and now he calls Harry every chance he gets.

("Hello? Harry, it's me. Are you free? Would you like me to come over?"

"Hello? Harry, it's me. I'm getting ready to Floo over right now."

"Hello? Harry, it's me. I'm in your living room."

"Hello? Harry, it's me. Do you have anything to drink?"

"Ron," Harry would say, "Is it really necessary to call me on my phone when you're in my kitchen and I'm in the hallway?")

"Hello? Harry, it's me," Ron says, as if Harry could possibly mistake him for someone else. "Your opera is on the London stage again."

About a year after the war, Harry had gotten the Owl requesting his permission for his image and his story to be used in an opera.

This had arrived as a single missive in a flood of other Owls of a similar nature. After the war, they wanted to put his face on all sorts of products: lunchboxes and hats, shoes and shirts and even underpants. Companies called asking him to endorse their products in exchange for money and for free samples. Advertisements often ran as thus:

Harry Potter swears our cleansing charms will vanquish Moldemort forever from your home!! And we will leave your smile sparkling-white, too! (For use on showers, toilets and teeth!)

Defeat the Dark Lord with our Shark Cords! (Don't worry - Harry doesn't know what these are, either.)

Harry Potter endorses our laxative! Live free of the fear of You-No-Poo from this moment on! He guarantees that you'll go to the loo, and for a small amount extra, there will be no goo.

Feeling erectily dysfunct? Not to worry! Harry Potter says, 'This potion will

defeat the days of You-No-Screw!' Do it with one, do it with two! Win over that girl you're trying to woo! You can even take it to Peru. If you're kinky, do it in the zoo. Comes with free goo.

Just to name a few.

Several people wanted book rights. Some people wanted to open up museums. The Harry Potter Museum of War. The War Museum of Harry Potter. They asked him to donate personal items for display. (*"Anything will do, really, Mr. Potter, school robes, textbooks with notes in them, your old essays, personal effects, undergarments..."*)

Harry had officially become a cash cow. He had an entire franchise in his name, and he had little to no say in it.

Most of the time he denied the offers, no matter how lucrative they were. (And really, what would he do with a lifetime supply of laxatives? Hermione was the anal-retentive one, wasn't she?...And no, he never felt erectily dysfunct, thank-you-very-much.) People got desperate and slapped his name on things anyway. In one of the war museums, his trainer was on display, which had apparently flown off of his foot during battle. (Typical, Malfoy would have said, since he was sloppy and didn't notice when his laces were untied.) This particular trainer, smeared with dirt and battle-worn, of course, was a size too large, and the yellowed sweat stains in it were not from a Saviour's foot. Not that it mattered to anybody who went to see it, along with other items that had supposedly nobly played a part in serving Harry Potter during the great war.

The opera, however, was something that he had actually agreed to - music and lyrics by renowned composer Stephanos Songheim. Afterwards, he couldn't remember why. Perhaps he had been in a particularly sensitive, emotional (read: tits over arse pissed on Firewhiskey) point when he had signed the contract. Just because he used to fuck a guy (just one, mind you) didn't mean that he had ever fostered a secret love for musical theatre.

Surprisingly, it had gotten rave reviews in the paper. *"HARRY POTTER SAVES WORLD THROUGH SONG AND DANCE."*

"HARRY POTTER ROCKS WIZARDING WORLD."

It was a sweeping epic of tragedy and triumph. It was an homage to his heroism. It was the story of his life, reduced to three hours of drawn-out musical numbers and feather costumes.

And now it was back in London, apparently, after having completed its worldwide tour.

"Hermione's trying to get me to go. She thinks it'll be cultural, or some bollocks like that," Ron says.

"Oh," says Harry. "Really? Not just weird? You guys are in it, too, you know. They sent me a copy of the script."

"They gave you the script? But now you'll know all the spoilers! Don't tell me, Harry."

" Ron, you know all the spoilers already. You know how it ends."

"Well, yeah. SPOILER: Harry Potter kills You-Know-Who."

"Spoiler: Snape kills Dumbledore."

Ron laughs a little, and Harry tries to decide if the sound is uneasy or not. "Spoiler: a fuckload of people die."

Harry coughs. "Look, I should go check on Draco. I left him upstairs, he might break something."

"Right. Erm, look, I was actually calling to ask..."

"What?"

"Hermione got us a box. So I'm supposed to ask you to dinner and if you want to see it..."

"I don't think I really want to, Ron. "

"C'mon, it'll be fun. By which I mean torturous."

"You don't even want to see it."

"Misery, company, so on and so forth."

"I can't leave Draco at home."

"So bring him! Malfoy might even like it, hey, it might even be good for him, you never know."

Harry sighs – he isn't about to invest fully in the dubious healing properties of wizarding opera, but Ron could be right. Possibly. Maybe. "What time and when is it, again?"

Actually, Harry isn't sure whether Draco would even like the opera. Still, it's nice to have a reason to get dressed up and go out. He buttons up Draco's black dress robes and smoothes down his hair - he looks almost achingly good like this, like his old, impeccable self again. And just like the old Malfoy, he's perfect as long as he doesn't talk. Draco holds himself a bit taller, his posture familiar, unfaltering. Ron makes a disturbed look when he sees him but for once bites his tongue. Hermione smiles and says, "You look very nice," and Draco, vain thing that he is, actually smiles at her, genuinely.

It's only when they're in a crowd together that he clings to Harry, and Harry walks a bit faster.

They duck into the theatre as the house lights are going dim, the usher giving them a nasty look for asking to be seated after doors have closed, before he realises who Harry is. Harry agrees to sign his usher-hat.

Voldemort is played by a tall, thin svelte man who likes flowy robes and seems to swish around a lot. He cuts an impressive figure and possesses a very inspiring singing voice. Harry never thought that he would ever encounter anything more horrifying than the real Dark Lord, but he thinks that they have provided an accurate rendition in this portrayal of You-Know-Who as the DARK LORD OF THE DANCE.

"Wow," says Ron, stunned into silence by the magnificence of the scene.

"Yeah," says Harry.

Harry is played by an actor who is tall, dark, handsome – all of the things that one would expect a Saviour to be. He is, incidentally, taller, darker, and handsomer than Harry, but who's keeping score?

He looks a bit like Superman. Chiselled features, rock hard body, perfect, shiny, artfully messy hair. His fake glasses have no glass in them to show off brilliantly green eyes. He sings in a strong and clear and heroic tenor, and his white grin is blinding.

His painted-on scar sparkles. Harry is pretty sure that they put some glitter in it.

"Wow," says Ron, "you're a tool."

Harry, sadly, is inclined to agree. "It could have been worse," Harry says. "It could have been tights."

Ron and Hermione are less than happy with the chosen portrayals of their characters.

"My hair never looked like that!" Hermione cries.

The singer playing Hermione wore a large, bushy wig, that sprouted out from her head like a halo of hair and twine. It looked like what one might expect if a beehive exploded.

"What's with all the weird spots all over my faces?" Ron says. "I look like a dirty bum!"

Unfortunately for Ron, apparently freckled opera singers did not exist. To compensate, this one had large dots of brown stage-makeup as a substitute, looking as if he had stuck his
finger in chocolate and then poked all over his own cheeks and nose.

"You don't look that dirty," Hermione informs him kindly.

"I actually think it looks more like a disease," Harry supplies helpfully, and Draco laughs.

Draco Malfoy is a member of the dramatis personae as well, something that Harry knew from glancing over the script but had conveniently forgotten about.

The plot is too different from real-life events to actually jar any sort of memory.

In this Draco is a tragic figure, a victim of circumstances and poor decisions, and he dies by the end of the opera, singing a tragic solo.

After the show, Hermione wants to meet the cast. They ask Harry what he thought of their performances. Harry lies and tells them they were wonderfully accurate.

"I really think I captured your dashing heroism well," says the singer who played Harry. His grin is blinding.

"Erm, yes," says Harry, squinting at his teeth. "You did a smashing job."

Autographs are exchanged. Underwear is pulled out. Hermione twists her hair around one finger and frowns at all the actresses.

Afterwards, Draco looks at him with awe.

"Y-you really saved the world?" he asks.

"J-just l-like that?"

"Well, not exactly. But yeah." Harry loops an arm around his shoulders. "There was less singing involved. And not so much glitter."

Draco hums the songs all the way home. He can keep on singing for days, the way he does when something has amused him. Harry smiles at him indulgently, and doesn't notice when Ron and Hermione look the other way.

"You died," Ron says to Draco, cheerfully. "Wasn't that great?"

"Ron!" says Hermione sharply.

There's an epic death solo that the character of Draco Malfoy sings as he tragically becomes a casualty of war. Draco sings it aloud, making up words to the tune, and Harry hates it, so he makes him stop.

Draco continues singing, under his breath.

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-"Magnificent promises are always to be suspected."-

It was the last night before summer hols and Harry knew that they would not be able to say goodbye come morning. For a moment he imagined what it would be like to actually sit together on the Hogwarts Express and maybe part on the platform like normal people, but then he was horrified he even entertained that idea in the first place and the moment was gone.

"I'll Owl," Harry said.

"You'd better," Malfoy said.

Harry looked down at the ground, then back up, and decided, oh, fuck it.

"I'll miss you," he blurted out, quickly. It came out sounding more like "'llmissoo."

Draco rolled his eyes. "For God's sake, Potter, it's only a couple of months, not forever. I think we'll somehow manage to survive."

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-"Wings to set me free, to lift me into unremembering, to waft me from the days of things –"-

Draco always wants it, when Harry does. He needs someone to touch him all over, show him that he's loved.

"Do you remember this?" Harry asks softly, knowing. He doesn't need to hear the answer.

Harry's thoughts are like mice, scurrying back and forth, furry and quick, with little scratchy mice feet.

"More," Draco says, almost shyly. "Want more, H-Harry."

"Are you going to be good for me?" Harry prompts, running a hand up all that smooth skin.

And Draco would close his eyes and nod and promise anything, anything just to be with him. When he pushes into Draco, he's tight and perfect and responsive around him. He feels exhausted afterwards, as if all his bones have dissolved and then been replaced with jelly.

Harry stares at the sinuous white curve of Draco's back, listening to each deep, even breath. He ghosts his fingers over the line of ridges in Draco's back, where the vertebrae are visible just under porcelain skin.

He reads his skin, the bumps of him like Braille.

Draco fits slim and snug and perfect against him, arms locked around his neck, as if afraid that someone will come and try to take him away.

On beautiful days, Harry takes Draco flying, because this is something that he should remember, the joy of the wind in his face, of the world falling away.

Draco locks his arms around his waist, clings to him tightly. He is joyful and he is overjoyed. Harry can feel the warmth of him against his back and they are diving into an ocean of sky.

Harry has never felt so wonderful, so liberated in his entire life.

Draco doesn't need his own broom, Harry figures. What use would he

have for it, anyway?

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-"Betrayal is the only truth that sticks."-

In the fall of seventh year, Harry didn't go back to Hogwarts.

Neither did Malfoy.

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-"The advantage of a bad memory is that one enjoys several times the same good things for the first time."-

Together, they go back to Hogwarts. Harry been back perhaps once or twice since it's been rebuilt – once to give a speech for the ground-breaking Ceremony (which he "umm"'d and "err"'d his way through, he was never very eloquent, developed a hatred for speeches and even more for eulogies, but no one seemed to mind his stuttering) and another for an event to speak to.

The empty classrooms and hallways are familiar, although slightly different from before they had been destroyed.

Harry shows Draco around, as if giving the grand tour through the past. Holding his hand, he shows him where they fought and where they had kissed.

"You were bruised, right here," Harry says, stroking his cheek.

For old time's sake he takes him into the Potions classroom, tells him stories of the detentions that they spent there. Draco nods, running his fingers over all the wooden desks, peeks inside cauldrons. He goes to where he used to sit and perches on top of the desk, legs swinging and kicking casually.

Harry pushes him back onto his old desk and kisses him, undresses him the way he once did, pulling off a jumper, unbuttoning an Oxford shirt. He's not wearing a tie but if he were, Harry might use it to tie up his hands or to choke him, he's not sure which.
When he pushes into him Draco cries out, arching up and into it. Harry watches his face and thinks of when they had first done this, and Draco is as wonderful as always.

"You stepped on my face, do you remember that?" Harry asks afterwards, companionably, squeezing Draco's hand in his.

"That's s-silly, Harry," he frowns and forces himself to repeat the word. "Silly. Why'd...Why'd I want to do that?"

"You wanted to hurt me," Harry tells him, stroking his hair.

Draco looks terrified at the idea. "Never hurt you, Harry! Never!"

"No," Harry said, and he smiled slowly. "You won't hurt me now, and

not ever again, will you?"

"Never," Draco promises. Harry knows he means it.

Sometimes Draco's face seems to flicker with recognition, but that could have just been a trick of the light.

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-"War is Death's Feast."-

The air had felt cold even when the weather wasn't cold.

They all expected Harry to do something; they could not understand that he couldn't do anything. The turned to him with hopeful faces and eyes and Harry was only seventeen, he didn't even know how to save himself, never mind the world.
His first death was nothing like he expected Death to be – but what was death, that you could expect it? Both the deaths that Harry had seen in his life had been neat, bloodless things, Cedric falling dead at his feet, Sirius falling through a veil. He had expected something like that.

Maybe it was the intent in the spell – Harry didn't mean it enough, couldn't hate enough to cast it right – but a Death Eater had been coming at him (he didn't even know which one, the mask, that white, horrible mask, all he could see was that mask) and Harry had aimed and screamed the incantation.

It had blasted the man in his chest, but he didn't just die. It wasn't neat and perfect like he'd always seen, it wasn't like he was alive one minute and dead the next. It took him a while to die, how long, Harry didn't know, he didn't stay – could not stay- to find out. He had coughed up blood and screamed and screamed and bits, soft, red, gut-like, jelly-like bits, were burbling out of his mouth.

It was horrible, horrible. Harry's hands shook for three days; every mark he made on the battle plans just came out all squiggly lines.

His first battle, he saw a man who was all burned up, his face unrecognisable save for one perfect band of skin underneath his hair. He thought that they'd stick to Stunning Spells, even the neat little Unforgiveable. That wasn't, of course, the case.

Every subsequent death was like making a hole wider; they dig and they dig at you but in the end you're still adding up nothing. Harry scratched tallymarks on the wall, to pass the time – one and one and a set of five, they did not stand for anything. He peeled back wallpaper at 12 Grimmauld Place and found an entirely different layer of wallpaper – he counted this as an accomplishment in and of itself.

Ron drew maps, for lack of anything better to do. He plotted out strategies and X's and O's, swirls and arrows, paper-napkin battle plans when they sat together at dinner.

"I want to put in water," Ron said, "but we're all out of blue ink."

He gave the illusion of being productive while not producing much of anything useful at all. They were increasingly elaborate; houses and underground tunnels, pathways and forests, rocky terrain and mountains. The houses had windows and doors, the forests had individual trees, some of the trees even had branches and leaves.

"Quiet!" Ron hushed. "I'm putting places on my map."

They were all losing it, a little; they huddled around a radio at night, listening for news of attacks, of losses and victories. There was no time to mourn the dead, there was barely time to bury the dead. Hermione took notes.

Ron talked about his map incessantly; he mentioned the places that he was plotting, the locations of the bases, offered them to Harry for his strategic planning.

"YOU AND THAT INFERNAL MAP," Harry finally said one day, and then he slammed the door and stormed out of the room.

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-"If any question why we died, tell them because our fathers lied."-

Harry faced Lucius Malfoy at the Manor, out in the courtyard where Draco had surely grown up, where he had probably had tea with his mother and learned to fly.

Had they been a happy family? These things were important to know. Had Draco grown up playing ball and Quidditch and laughing and learning about the Dark Lord, who would one day rise again?

"Potter," Lucius Malfoy sneered. "Draco's told me so very much about you."

It was easy to mean it.

One of the things that Harry would remember later is all that blonde hair, once meticulous, whipping about Lucius Malfoy's face, like a tangle of long, thin wires, like fishing lines with all the hooks cut or maybe digging into his wretched brain. His once-fine robes were streaked with dirt, tattered at the edges. He looked old; the wrinkles in his face made prominent by the grime caked into the lines. War hadn't been kind to him; then again, war is rarely kind.

He wore his insanity regally, like the cape of a king. (Mad eyes, Draco would have said, Crazy eyes, Full of The Crazy.)

He opened his eyes much far too open, to the point where Harry thought that it must be painful. For one horrifyingly hilarious moment, Harry thought they would pop out of his head, comically, attached to springs. Like those joke glasses Fred and George sold that looked like real eyeballs; just like that.

In an instant he looked like Draco and then he didn't at all; the two images seemed to blur together, and maybe it was the light and maybe it was Harry's mind. Harry wanted to rip his face off like ripping off the Death Eater mask. His voice was high-pitched and it gave Harry shivers that cut his spine, meticulously, into little slices.

There were things that didn't seem important at the time, that somehow mattered now. Was he facing East or West?

Harry wanted him to suffer before he wanted him to die. The first curse cut into Lucius Malfoy's arm, the next at his shoulder. He didn't

even hiss with pain, and it was then that Harry realised that he could tear him apart piece by piece, and he wouldn't notice.
The blood splashed hot on the perfectly paved path. Harry almost swore he could see it steam.

He was so ragged, torn and worn (and yet he wore Draco's face when he wasn't wearing the mask and Harry wanted to peel apart the skin). He wanted to rip him apart with his hands, to hear him scream, skin from muscle and then muscle from bone, but he would not do that, he could not do that. That sort of punishment was for Draco himself, a murder most intimate.

He looked up at Harry afterwards with almost-familiar cold grey eyes, empty and unseeing. Harry knelt over him; he could have plucked out those eyes, easily – he could have disassembled this Lucius Malfoy. Instead he reached out with trembling hand and he pulled the eyelids down, shutting them forever. Harry thought, when did this happen?

He heaved into that beautiful garden afterwards, sick sick sick. Everything was gone to seed.

Harry would do it all over again, if he could.

And it isn't until later that he realises that he had forgotten to ask one very important question: had he loved him?

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-"What if they gave a war and nobody came?"-

Sometimes it was taxing. In the beginning, it was very taxing.

It was the first of the worst battles, actually. Only the first. Harry had thought, at the time, that he had seen a glimpse of blonde hair. It didn't matter, really, because then he was in the midst of it, kill or be killed, and if he faced off against Draco Malfoy, he'd have to kill him, too.

They had lost Oliver Wood. Harry's unerring Captain, who had so predictably and wonderfully gone on to play professional Quidditch after school. They had lost others as well, people Harry had met once or twice and would never get to remember their names, now. Ron had been wounded – a slice to his arm to block the curse, but there had been a lot of blood. If he hadn't been so quick, who knew what could have happened. He had screamed, this Harry remembered well, the sound of it ringing out into the air and his own breath catching. The sliced-open arm looked like so much meat, and there had been so much blood.

Harry put his face down in his hands. Hermione came in the room, every bit of her frazzled, and she said, "Ron's going to be okay."

Harry lifted up his face, and he could feel the air cold on his wet cheeks although he hadn't known that he'd been crying. He said, "I've been fucking Draco Malfoy."

Hermione made a strangled noise. She said, quietly, "what."

Harry laughed a little. "Not recently of course. But yeah. For all of last year."

She just nodded, taking a seat beside him, her face drawn and pale. Tired. They were all so tired. On some level she must have known – and how did Hermione do that, how did she always know? And if she was so smart, if she knew so much, could she tell Harry the answers to all the questions that he needed to hear? Could she have known that this was going to happen? That this whole thing was doomed from the start? And if so, why didn't she warn him?

Harry of course knew that it was a bad idea from the start, but there had been a moment where he had allowed himself to believe...

He resolved to be a pessimist from then on.

Hermione said, "Don't tell Ron until he's recovered."

Harry said, "Yeah."

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What is the saying? If you love something, set it free...if it returns to you, then it belongs to you forever. If it doesn't...

If it doesn't...

If it doesn't, break its legs and keep it anyway.

Harry knows that is not quite right, but he can't think of the real version, for now.
When he comes home from a day at work Draco meets him at the door, throwing his arms around him. Without any prompting, he leans forward and kisses him, soft and sweet.

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-"I have seen war... I have seen blood running from the wounded. I have seen men coughing out their gassed lungs. I have seen the dead in the mud.. . I have seen children starving. I have seen the agony of mothers and wives. I hate war."-

On one of the few good days, Fred and George had taken the chickens, remnants of their food supply, and painted their feathered backs and made them race. They had wanted to make them fight, but this had upset Ginny too much - but it hadn't upset just her, of course.

"Clucking good times," Fred had said.

"Cluck you," said George.

The next day, they lost Fred. Everyone had cried, and when Harry closed his eyes, there was always someone who cried.
George didn't cry. It was like he was empty inside, and there wasn't enough left of him to cry.

They were not prepared for the atrocities of war. Harry knew that he'd have to kill Voldemort, but no one had ever told him that he'd have to kill others...that he'd have to kill people. Thinking of Faceless Death Eaters had once made this easy. Now, every one of them had a face, any one of them could have been him.

And when it happened, if it happened, he'd have to kill him, too, because someone who would not hesitate to rip your figurative heart out of your chest would not hesitate to do it literally.

They could not sleep, they turned thin. Molly Weasley pulled out strands of her hair, slowly, one by one, saying that she was only pulling out the white. Ginny bit her nails down to the skin. Ron drew maps, more and more maps, filled up a whole room with them and then started layering the new ones on the walls.

Harry got to the point where he watched a man's heart burst and blood seep from his eyes and he still had the appetite for lunch afterwards.

Harry did what he had to do.

And when it was over, it was all supposed to be over.

The bodies were laid out, the blood had been shed, the prophecy fulfilled, they had hugged and cried and cried.

All Harry had wanted, just then, was the rest of his life. And possibly a hot shower. And then he heard the news:

They had found him, covered in blood, red in his hair, on his skin, like spilled ink on parchment. Worse than Frank and Alice Longbottom, they never had to watch their loved ones brutally murdered, taken apart piece by piece in front of their eyes. The Killing Curse would have been too merciful.

At first they hadn't known whether he would wake up. Later the reports came in on how it had happened. They were cold and unemotional, the way most bad news came to them, those days.

Lucius Malfoy was dead. Narcissa Malfoy was tortured and killed, Draco was forced to watched before he was tortured himself.

Oh, okay.

Report received.

Carry on.

Harry can't even imagine what this was like, the screams of pain. This was the reward for their unerring loyalty. This was how it always happened, in the end.

For a long time, Harry could not stand to go to the hospital. He was too afraid of what he would do if he did. It wasn't Draco in there, wasn't even a Malfoy, and whatever it was wearing Draco Malfoy's name and face and body just to mock him.
Which he supposed was kind of like Draco, in a way.

He showed up, just once, when he was still comatose. The sight of that familiar face so pale and white lying against hospital sheets made him break a little more, but he didn't cry. He had used up a lot of tears over the course of the war. He felt dried up, inside, as dry as bone, as desert sand, as thin and brittle as an insect husk or an autumn leaf.

"I could have protected you," Harry had snarled at him. "I could have, but you didn't trust me. You never trusted me, did you?"

"You're so stupid, *stupid*, such a bloody moron, fucking moron, I *knew* this would happen, how could you not know?"

He made himself leave before he did anything stupid, like kill the bastard.

He didn't go back to the hospital for a year, although he thought about him all the time. He read in the paper that he would not be going to Azkaban, on account of his insanity. Draco Malfoy was harmless, now, a little Eater of Death de-fanged.

When he finally did go back, Draco didn't remember him. Didn't even known him as THE Harry Potter, Boy Who Lived, Saviour of the Wizarding World, which was what everybody else knew him as.

Harry felt as if someone had died, only he wasn't sure which one of them it was.

He waited two months until the next visit. And then he visited after that, both regularly and erratically, depending on the season. He went more during the winter, and also during the spring. Summers he did not like to go at all –not at first, at any rate.
Soon he was just Harry, Draco's friend. One of his only friends, after the war – not on account that he was unpopular, but more on the account that his friends were mostly dead.

Soon he was Harry, Draco's best friend in all the world. Draco trusted him implicitly, loved him completely, and was always happy and warm and affectionate even when Harry stared at him and thought, I'd like to kill you slowly or I want to take care of you forever.

Harry only has questions, and he knows Draco has no answers for him.

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-"We need time to dream, time to remember, time to reach the infinite. Time to be."-

"What are you doing after school?" Harry asked, avoiding the obvious answer of going to war.

"I have some money.. could get a place..." The together wasn't mentioned but both heard of it.

"A little loveshack, how quaint. A swinging bachelor pad, I suppose. Very well. Be sure to install a revolving door for the ladies."

"Any pets?" Harry prodded, amused.

"I think I'd like an elephant," Draco said contemplatively. "I saw them at the zoo once. They were highly amusing. But then again, I suppose I like dumb, brutish things."

He gave Harry a slow smile, thought of something and added, "I suppose you could say, I also like things that are hung—"

"Don't even complete that phrase! Augh!" Harry cried, putting his hand over Draco's mouth to shut him up.

Draco licked his hand and Harry snatched it away, laughing. And then he had hit him, but not in any way that hurt.

This followed in a small scuffle, with Draco tumbled back on the grass. Harry hovered over him and looked down, one hand brushing the blonde hair back so that it fanned around his head like a halo.

"Ugh, I'm sure there are grass stains all over my clothes now," Draco said, but did not move.

"But really," Harry asked, "what're we going to do?"

Draco caught his hand and pulled him down. "We," he said, "are both going to do what we have to. And then, after that, we'll do the best we can."

-*-

-"The heart is a nightingale, throbbing against the bones of its cage."-

It's spring and another beautiful, clear day. Maybe today, Harry can take Draco flying. It's one of those perfect days, where nothing in the world can possibly be wrong. The sky stretches blue, endlessly. When he wakes in the morning, the birds are singing outside his window, and he knows it's perfect weather for a day out. Together, they go to the park, and Harry's never been so happy to be there. The picnic basket is half un-packed and there's pastries strewn carelessly everywhere; some store-bought, some courtesy of Ron. Harry's wary of the Ron ones – according to Hermione, he's been experimenting with new fillings, and he thinks that Strawberry-and-Chili should be the new craze.

Draco is sitting in the cool green grass, pulling up blades of and rubbing it between his fingers. His pale fingers are slightly stained with the juice, and Harry knows he'll be able to smell it on him later, air and sunshine and moist earth and grass and sky and everything that's all his. A squirrel approaches, cautious, before it flicks its tail and runs away.

Draco watches the birds, watches an ant on his knee, and Harry watches him before he goes over to sit beside him, to take him into his arms.

"Love you, Harry," Draco says, his voice clear and pronunciation perfect. "I love you."

Harry holds him tight, his face against the silk of his hair, and for a second he can pretend that they are both who they used to be. With his arms around him, he breathes him in, and the second passes and so does the need to pretend.

"I love you, too," Harry says. "Yes. I love you. I do. Yes."

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